

リリアアと トレイズ IV

イクストルーヴァの一番長い日(下)

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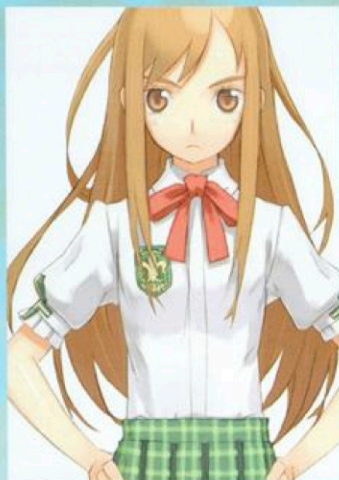
リリアと トレイーズ

IV

イクストルーヴァの一番長い日〈下〉







リリア・シュルツ

十五歳。
ロクシアーク連邦(東側)首都に住む
上級学校三年生。
母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。
特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。
本名はとても長い。

トラヴァース少佐

三十五歳。
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合
(西側)の軍人。
大使館に勤める駐在武官で
秘密情報部員。
要するにスパイ。
アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、
正体は……。



アリソン・シュルツ

三十五歳。
ロクシェ空軍大尉。
現在はテスト飛行士として活躍中。
首都のアパートで
娘リリアと二人暮らし。
寝起きは相変わらずとても悪い。

トレイズ

十六歳。
フランチェスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。
イクス王国の王子だが、
諸事情により王子ではない。
メリエル王女は双子で、
どちらが年上かと係争中。
正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



フランチェスカ女王(フィオナ) & ベネディクト

三十八歳と四十二歳。
イクス王国の現女王と、
“壁画発見の歴史的英雄”だったその夫。
イクス王国にてのんびりと生活中。

Lillia Schultz: 15 years old. A third-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying. Her full name is extremely long.

Treize: 16 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize was supposed to be a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevented him from claiming royal status. He and his twin sister Meriel are constantly arguing over who the older one is. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, though she doesn't know his true identity.

Allison Schultz: 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

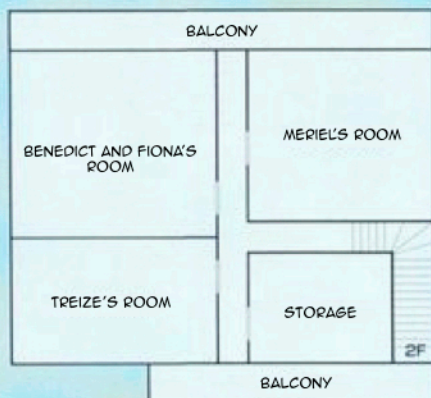
Major Travas: 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

Queen Francesca(Fiona)&Benedict: 38 and 42 years old, respectively. Francesca(Fiona) is the current Queen of Ikstova, and Benedict her husband is the Hero of the Mural. They are currently living a relaxed life in Iks.

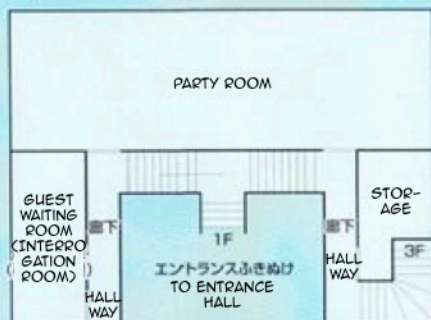
【イクス王室離れ・簡略図】

ROYAL VILLA OF IKSTOVA
(SIMPLIFIED BLUEPRINTS)

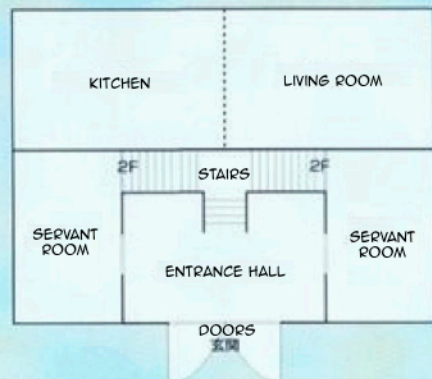
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リリアと トレイズ IV

イクスストーリーの一番長い日(下)

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Chapter 5: The Treasure of Ikstova

"What is the Treasure of Ikstova?" Asked Laurie.

"Pardon?" Fiona asked, her eyes widening. Laurie snorted.

"So you've got the gall to play dumb, eh?"

Fiona looked at Benedict—first with just her eyes, then by turning. He sat about 2 meters away with his wrists taped. But when their eyes met, Benedict tilted his head.

Fiona turned back to Laurie.

"The Treasure of Ikstova? Hm... there's a lot in this country I could call a treasure—its beautiful landscape, its kind people, and its cutting-edge technology—so I'm not certain what precisely you mean." Fiona replied, only half-joking.

"Heh. Not bad."

Laurie laughed. Then she looked down at Fiona with a smile.

"You think I know nothing? Let me explain for you, Queen Francesca. I want to know about the treasure passed down the line of Ikstova's kings and queens. The treasure that you've been keeping for the past four hundred years. It must be something incredible if the royal family adhered to the unnatural policy of producing only a single heir to the throne to prevent in-fighting for the treasure, even risking the end of the royal line."

Fiona said nothing. Benedict's eyes widened as he stared at his confused wife. Laurie continued.

"We will be taking the treasure."

Fiona was silent.

"Cat got your tongue, Queen Francesca?"

"What? ...Yes, that is alarming."

"Of course." Laurie grinned triumphantly. "Let's make this quick. Tell me everything you know about the treasure."

Laurie reached over and turned off the tape recorder. Then, she switched out the cassette—which wasn't yet finished—for a new one. She started recording again.

"Year 3306 of the World Calendar. The royal family's villa. The answer to the four hundred-year mystery, from the mouth of the queen. Everything about the Treasure of Ikstova."

Laurie condescendingly recorded the title.

"If you will, Your Majesty."

Fiona still said nothing. For three seconds she wondered what to do. Laurie smirked as she watched.

"Er... well..."

Fiona finally managed to open her mouth, but she trailed off.

"We have come this far. Perhaps you should tell the truth about the treasure at least?" Said Benedict.

"What?"

Fiona stared, surprised. He smiled and winked.

"I thought I told you to hold your tongue. But I suppose I could let it pass this time." Laurie said in an amused tone.

"I understand."

"Thank you for finally giving in, Queen Francesca."

"Then let me explain. The treasure that's been passed down through generations of kings and queens in our royal family..."

Everyone held their breath. Laurie, sitting across the table. Benedict, sitting to the side. And the two men standing guard.

Fiona continued.

"I have no idea what it is. The royal family had a treasure?"

There was a moment of silence.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!" Laurie burst out laughing. "You do seem to enjoy your jokes, Queen Francesca."

Fiona, however, was as solemn as ever.

"You said yourself that I returned from the dead. You know my past."

"Of course. Injured in the attack on the palace as a girl, and raised as a village girl for ten years with no memories of the past. Then you remembered your identity and made a dramatic entrance at the political rally in Kunst, accompanied by the Hero of the Mural who happened to be at your side."

"Yes. So—"

"So you want to say you don't know where the treasure is hidden? Funny. It seems to me like Her Majesty remembered many important things after her coronation. Any child could tell that you were using information exclusive to the royal family to rebuild the monarchy."

"That's—"

Fiona stopped herself.

Fiona was not Francesca. The knowledge she received from Francesca actually amounted to nothing at all. All the information she needed to restore the monarchy had come from the people who had pretended to be villagers in the valley—the people who had worked in the old palace. They told her everything the late Princess Francesca would have known.

“Yes?”

“It’s nothing.” Fiona shook her head, unable to bring herself to tell the truth.

“So you forgot only information on the treasure? Convenient, that.”

“I was only ten years old. Mother would never have told me something so important then.” Fiona retorted firmly. But—

“More excuses. Enough stalling, Queen Francesca.” Laurie replied with surprising confidence. “I’ve already confirmed that the heir to the throne is given the information on their tenth birthday.”

“What? Wh-what did you say?” Fiona cried.

Benedict also glanced at Laurie, sitting confidently in her chair.

“I’m getting tired of your attempts at stalling.” Laurie spat, and repeated herself. “On their tenth birthday, the heir to the throne is taught about the existence of the treasure. And with the great weight of the secret in mind, the heir prepares with trepidation to rise to the throne. I’ve done my research.”

“I didn’t—”

Fiona caught herself before she could say the truth.

Taking slow, deep breaths, she calmed herself. Then she spoke again.

“How did you know?” She said, honestly curious to know.

“You think we did this on a whim? No... a couple of years wouldn’t have been enough to prepare for this moment.” Laurie replied, convinced that Fiona knew about the treasure.

Fiona was silent, not knowing what to say.

“Miss Laurie, let me ask you something. How much do you know?” Benedict said firmly, sounding incensed.

Laurie ignored Fiona and glared at Benedict.

“Looks like I’ll have to take back what I told you, Hero of the Mural. I’m glad you’re finally interested in what we have to say.”

“No prolonged introductions, please. Please just tell us how much you know.”

“‘Prolonged’, eh? Your Roxchean isn’t half bad. All right—let me explain.”

Laurie picked up a small bag that had been at her feet. It was a rough black bag used more by men than women. From it she took out a leather file and a pair of white gloves.

Putting on the gloves, Laurie unwrapped the string from the knob on the file and opened it.

Inside were several documents and an old piece of discolored paper folded several times over. Laurie put aside the documents and carefully spread out the paper on the desk. It was very large, measuring at about 50 centimeters long.

"If you can't see, stand up. But do not touch it."

"Then if you'll excuse me."

Benedict slowly stood. Because his hands were wrapped in tape, he had to stand up close to the table and lean slightly down. The man behind him cautiously went up to his back.

Fiona thought for a moment before doing the same. Laurie, Benedict, and Fiona formed a triangle with the table in the center.

It was a map.

"This is a map of Ikstova." Fiona muttered.

The eastern part was near Fiona and Benedict, and the western part near Laurie. On the rightmost edge of the map was the long, narrow Lake Ras, which stretched for 100 kilometers from north to south.

Where Kunst should have been, at the southeastern tip of the lake, was a light green border outlining a smaller village. It was the same for Mushke in the northeast. But there were no words on the lake or the settlements indicating their names.

Around the lake on the map, mountain peaks were indicated by pointed symbols rather than contour lines. As the country was surrounded by mountains in every direction, most of the map was filled with the symbols. And dotted between them were unlabeled valleys.

The eastern tip of the map went up to the two mountain paths that led to what was currently the Republic of Raputoa, and the western tip went to the heart of the Central Mountain Range.

Fiona's gaze fell on the long string of words on the bottom right part of the map. It was written in cursive, but was neither Roxchean nor Bezelese.

"Can you read it, Queen Francesca?" Laurie asked without warning. Fiona looked up.

"What? Y-yes."

Fiona leaned forward with her hands on the desk and read out the words.

"I look upon my beloved land of Ikstova from the sky'."

"I cannot read it myself, but I understand that this is written in Ikstovan." Said Benedict. Fiona nodded.

"As you can see," said Laurie, "this is a map of Ikstova from before the founding of the Roxcheanuk Confederation, when Ikstovan was the official language of this country. We don't have a specific date, but since Roxche was founded in 3122, we can say this map is at

least a hundred and eighty years old—and judging from the state of the paper, likely over two hundred.”

“It is a valuable treasure.” Benedict said reverently. Fiona nodded.

“Yes. It is. We had nothing of this sort left after the fire at the palace.”

“Naturally. You couldn’t put a price on something like this.”

Her eyes on the map, Fiona said quickly,

“And it’s almost frightening how accurate it is. The lakeshore is identical to those from modern maps, and all the nearby peaks are exactly where they should be. ...And this map also records the depths of the mountain range we still can’t traverse with modern technology. How is this possible? An imagined landscape is one thing, but if someone actually went out to survey the land like this... I can’t believe it.”

“Even in Sou Be-Il, it was only about a hundred years ago that we created detailed maps of the land. The Royal Army undertook the survey after modernization.”

“So you’ve never seen the map, then? I’m glad you like it. Looks like this mission wasn’t for naught after all.” Laurie mocked.

“I understand now!” Benedict played along. “Miss Laurie, you caused all this violence in order to give this map as a gift to the queen. You have my gratitude. We are very happy with this map. We will make this a national treasure. Let us give you a gift in return and show you out the door.”

“You’ll do well to know when to shut up.” Laurie threatened. Benedict shrugged lightly.

Fiona was still staring at the map in wonder when Laurie turned back to her.

“Now let’s hear it. Give me all the information you have.”

Both Fiona and Benedict grew solemn again.

“...”

“Well...”

While Fiona remained silent, Benedict spoke. He made a point of putting on a dubious face as he shot Laurie a glare.

“If you have even brought this map, you must have done a great deal of research already.” He lied without missing a beat. Fiona cast him a glance and decided to say nothing, entrusting everything to her husband.

“Right here.”

With her gloved hand Laurie pointed at a place on the map, right in front of Fiona. Benedict had to lean in to see properly.

Laurie’s finger was on a spot in the mountain range, deep down a valley that began from royal property on the southern shore of Lake Ras. It was about 200 kilometers away, past a

sea of mountains. The spot was at about the halfway point of the Central Mountain Range, which was about 3~400 kilometers wide.

The valleys around Lake Ras were generally used for cattle farming. In the summer, people could enter areas up to 3000 meters above sea level. But that was only in places a few kilometers from the lake—or a few dozen kilometers at most.

The place Laurie pointed at was a hinterland at least 8000 meters above sea level. Even if there was a valley running through the area, it was an untraversed land unsuitable for habitation.

"The strip of lakeshore that leads to this valley is property of the royal family. Civilian access is strictly restricted. The area could be easily stripped and used for cattle farming, but apparently it hasn't been touched in the last four hundred years. Now, why would you need to go so far for a run-of-the-mill valley? There's something here. That's the only explanation for why the royal family restricted access to the area."

"My goodness. You've done your research." Benedict said dramatically.

"But we still don't know the most important part—the identity of the treasure. We couldn't just rush in with vague notions of greatness. In fact, the treasure might not even be an object and it might only be accessible to those with the knowledge."

"If you knew, you would have looked for it there before you came here." Noted Benedict.

"Exactly. So—"

Laurie drew her revolver.

And with her right hand she took aim, not at Fiona, but Benedict. Elvar behind him moved without a sound. With the help of Kirk, who had been standing behind Fiona, he grabbed her by the elbows and pulled her several meters to the side.

Benedict faced the muzzle with a dubious face and took several steps away from the table.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious, Queen Francesca? Tell us everything you know about the treasure."

"And if I refuse?"

"I will shoot your husband where he stands."

Click. Laurie cocked the gun.

"You don't have much time, Queen. Either you tell us what the treasure is, or you watch your husband die."

Yet again Fiona hesitated, and Benedict spoke on her behalf. He stared down the gun aimed at his face.

"Ah, Fi."

"Huh?"

Fiona knew Benedict would never call her by that nickname in the presence of those ignorant to her secret. She looked right at him. He met her gaze.

"Fi. I might be shot to death here. But there is nothing to be sad about—there's nothing we can do about this. But you must never tell these people about the treasure."

Fiona was silent.

"Do you understand? The treasure is worth much more than the life of one person. If it falls into the hands of these villains, the world will fall to ruin. You know that well because you are the queen, yes?"

"Y-yes... Yes. I understand." Fiona nodded firmly.

"Hm." Laurie grunted.

A gunshot.

Gunfire echoed throughout the small room. Fiona flinched.

The bullet instantly passed over the desk—

—and drove itself into the wooden wall.

"That was dangerous." Benedict remarked. There was a long cut on his cheek and blood began to spill. The bullet had just grazed the side of his face.



Raising his bound arms, Benedict wiped the blood with his left hand. He stared at the red blood on his fingertips and turned to the hole in the wall behind him.

"What marksmanship."

Laurie smirked, revolver at the ready.

"I was aiming for your eye, actually."

"And an excellent sense of humor, too."

"Don't worry, I don't intend to miss next time. You have five seconds, Queen Francesca. This is an order. Tell us everything you know about the treasure." Laurie demanded.

Fiona answered, still restrained by the two men.

"Shoot him."

"What?"

"Didn't you hear me? Shoot him."

"You're *ordering* me to shoot your *husband*?"

"Yes. So hurry up and do it. And shoot me after him."

Laurie was dumbstruck.

"We'll die together here. Along with all the knowledge you're so desperate for. I'd rather bury the secret for good than let it fall into your hands."

"...As you wish, Queen!" Laurie hissed, taking aim at Fiona's forehead. "I'll wipe that calm look off your face!"

"Miss." Elvar said quietly. Laurie reacted at once.

"Call me 'Leader'!"

"Excuse me, Leader. Please, put the gun down. If you fall to her provocation now, all our planning will have been for nothing."

"I know that!"

Laurie lowered her revolver and motioned for the men to sit the hostages down. Elvar sat Benedict in his seat, and Kirk did the same for Fiona.

Laurie also sat and holstered her revolver. Then,

"Elvar, contact the party hall."

"Of course. What shall I tell them?"

"Pick out three or so of the hostages and drag them into the middle of the room, one by one. Shoot one in the head and put a few bullets in the other two's stomachs so they die writhing in pain. Make sure to inform them that we want to send the queen a message."

"Understood."

Elvar relayed Laurie's orders over the radio.

Laurie met Fiona's fierce glare.

"What's wrong, Queen Francesca?"

"I don't care what you do; I'm not going to tell you the secret. I've had more than enough of your foolishness."

"I'm not sure I care for your cheek, Queen Francesca. You've got a talent for making people angry, don't you?"

"I could say the same for you. Although it's telling that one of us isn't armed."

"Does it really bother you more for me to kill your servants than you or your husband? I'll never understand you."

After the volley of vitriol,

"Leader."

Elvar suddenly spoke.

"What is it?"

"Well..." Elvar trailed off uncharacteristically. "We just received word from the party hall. When the men tried to pick three hostages, all of them stood up to volunteer."

"...What?"

"It seemed they'd rather die than hinder the queen as hostages. Every last one of them asked to be killed. It seems we may have some difficulty carrying out your orders."

"..."

"Leader?"

"Then kill them all!" Laurie demanded. But Elvar shook his head.

"That would be meaningless, Leader. It would only give the queen an advantage. I believe you should retract your orders for the time being." He said coolly.

"Fine. You're right... Tell the men that I take back my order." Laurie said.

Elvar nodded and gave orders on the radio to hold off the execution.

"Those fanatics!" Laurie swore, slamming a fist on the table. The edge of the map fluttered upwards.

Fiona watched silently, breathing a long sigh of relief.

"We still have plenty of time, Leader. We can think of another way."

"Right." Laurie nodded, and glanced at her watch.

It was 2:30 in the morning.

The building shook with a deafening noise.

* * *

A little earlier.

"You're sure about this, right? The building's not going to explode? We're not going to get caught in the blast?"

Lillia watched anxiously as Treize focused on his work. He was cutting a ragged piece of cloth with a knife.

Treize sat on the basement floor. All kinds of things were strewn on the blanket in front of him. Junk from the basement, a tin of gunpowder for rifles, candles, matches, metal wire, bottles of different sizes, and lamp oil.

"It's going to be fine."

"You sound confident."

Treize was making bombs.

First, he got an empty liquor bottle 20 centimeters long and 8 centimeters wide and filled it with gunpowder. Then he stuck several fuses inside. And instead of a cork, he stuffed a thin, rolled-up piece of paper into the opening, and sealed it with candle wax.

Afterwards, he prepared an empty fruit wine bottle about 15 centimeters wide. Rather than glue, he used candle wax to stick the gunpowder bottle to the center of this one. He poured oil into it and stopped the mouth with a rag soaked with oil.

Finally, he capped it off with a lid with a hole punched through the top, and pulled out the rag that would become the fuse. And then he made another one.

"Done."

The moment Treize's hands came to a stop, Lillia butted in.

"So explain what you want me to do."

Still sitting on the floor, Treize looked up at Lillia.

"All right. These are handmade bombs. If you set this rag here on fire, it'll burn slowly until the oil inside the bottle catches fire. That's just burning oil, though. Afterwards, once the

candle wax on the inner bottle melts and the piece of paper inside burns, the heat is going to send the fuse flying and the gunpowder inside will explode. Then it'll bounce against the outer bottle and send burning oil scattering everywhere."

"That sounds so dangerous." Lillia gasped, grimacing.

"I want you to put one in the kitchen, Lillia."

"How? Don't tell me I have to toss it through the window."

"No. There's a grate inside the stove used for cooking things over a fire. And there's an ash pit underneath that. Outside, by the foundation, you'll find a metal tray that opens from the outside. It's for shoveling out the ash and dumping it on the garden. It's been a while since the kitchen was cleared, so the stove shouldn't be on right now. I want you to put one of the bombs in through the tray and set it on fire. Then run away as fast as you can and hide in the snow."

"I think I could manage that much. What happens after that?"

"If we're lucky, the bomb'll go off a few minutes later."

"Is this... really okay?"

"It's not that strong of a bomb."

"Are you sure?"

"Probably. Although I've never made one before."

"You're not giving me a lot of confidence here."

"Don't worry. All the force from the blast will travel upward, so it won't affect you below. And the kitchen's going to be fine, too. The bricks around the stove might not survive, but the kitchen itself was built with brick to prevent a big fire from spreading. The blast will lure the intruders to the kitchen. I'll use that moment to climb the gutters on the entrance side and get up to the third floor balcony."

"I see. So the bomb's a distraction. But won't they notice that someone infiltrated the place?" Asked Lillia. Treize's expression darkened.

"We'll have to trust our luck. They might just assume something was wrong with the stove, even if it does spew a bit of fire. We'll have to bank on that."

"But even if you make it in... what about me? What do I do afterwards?"

Treize shook his head.

"That's all you have to do, Lillia. Nothing after that."

"What?"

"I want you to get back here, using the snow as cover. On the off-chance someone does come after you, set the other bomb on fire and drop it on the snow. Hopefully he gets caught in the blast... if not, I'll at least hear the explosion and know someone's after you."

"Then you'll come save me?"

"No... I'll just know that the infiltrators are being dispersed..."

Lillia frowned.

"If nothing happens, just wait in here. I'll do what I can to call for help on the radio and get back here. You know how to operate the railcar in case someone chases you here, right? Just hold the lever and pull the trigger. You go back to the other side and wait until morning. Once the snowplow gets to the cottage, explain what happened to them and contact the police outside."

"...I wanted to keep an eye on you to make sure you didn't do anything stupid."

"I'm sorry, Lillia. But I can't take you after all. It's too dangerous."

"...Fine. We'll go with your plan."

"Please."

With a nod, Treize wrapped up the two bombs in ragged pieces of cloth and put them into separate bags. Then he placed a box of matches in Lillia's hands, and put on his hat and gloves.

"Leave the rifle."

"I know. It'll just get in the way."

Leaving the rifle, and without even shouldering his knapsack, Treize stood. And he slung the two bags with the bombs across either shoulder.

"Let's go. We're going to have to wade through the snow in the dark until we reach the villa."

"Yeah, yeah. I think I'm just about ready to take on anything at this point."

They climbed up the stairs.

Inside the woods, it was snowing just as hard as before.

The silence only broken by snow slipping off branches in clumps, Treize was practically swimming through the snow.

"Hah... hah..."

Wading through waist-high snow, he trod down a path for Lillia behind him as he moved forward. He could have walked over the snow with his snowshoes, but Lillia did not have a pair of her own and it was safer to have the snow as a cover anyway.

It was pitch-black, and they were moving uphill. Treize pressed on toward the faint lights from the villa in the distance.

Both Treize and Lillia—who was 3 meters behind him—and their hats and coats were completely covered with snow.

"Damn you, snow..." Lillia grumbled.

"Welcome to Ikstova." Treize said sarcastically. "But the snowflakes look lighter now. It's bound to stop pretty soon. That's how it's like here."

"Really?"

A clump of snow fell loudly from a nearby tree. That sound no longer scared Lillia and Treize, but they were oblivious to the fact that it had also masked a gunshot from the villa.

They continued to wade for about 80 meters. By the time they reached the tall tree only 2 meters to the west side of the villa, they were both breathing heavily.

"Phew... Let's take a break."

"Yeah..."

Treize and Lillia whispered.

Lillia stuck out her head from behind the tree and scanned the area. Light spilled between the villa's curtains as the building loomed like a crouching mountain.

Treize checked the rooms where the light was still on. He also made absolutely sure that the light in the kitchen was off.

"All right, Lillia. When you go back, just follow the tracks we made on the way. They won't disappear for a while yet."

"O-okay."

"The kitchen's this way. We'll go together for now. I'll give you the instructions once we get to the other side. And once I get away, count to a hundred and put the bomb inside, then light it. And then go back. Can you do that?"

"So I just count to a hundred? Okay."

"Yeah. Let's go."

Treize bent down and moved forward, clearing the snow piled to his chin. Lillia stuck close to him this time as she followed.

The snow dampened the noise they made, but they were still cautious to remain as quiet as possible as they moved forward. The snow piled on their hats and shoulders helped to camouflage them in the landscape. Two masses of white seemed to squirm in the snow.

Snow fallen from the west-side roof was piled on the ground. Lillia and Treize went around it and headed lower down the slope—the north side. Slowly and carefully, they climbed the steep stone steps that lined the base of the foundation under the eaves. The stairs were wet, but there was no snow on them. Eventually, they reached the kitchen wall.

"Here." Treize whispered into Lillia's ear.

There was a narrow landing on the stairs by the foundation. Treize stood there, pointing at a metal gate in the wall at about chest-level. He had Lillia stand in front of the wall and began to pull the gate to the right.

The gate opened smoothly without a sound. At about 120 degrees, it was completely open. A thin puff of ash rose into the air.

"Put the bomb in here, light it, and shut the gate. And run back as fast as you can. Okay?" Treize whispered, handing Lillia one of the bags he had slung over his shoulders. Lillia received it and slung it over her own shoulder as Treize had. Treize took the other bag and placed it at her feet.

"Okay. I just count to a hundred now, right?"

"Yeah. Now." Treize said, giving Lillia a light pat on the shoulder. Then he passed beside her and descended the stone steps.

"Take ca—"

Before Lillia could finish, Treize had already walked off. Quickly, he disappeared round the foundation corner.

"...One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight."

Lillia quietly began to count down.

Treize was moving with his back pressed to the foundation wall. Quietly and smoothly, so as to not make a sound.

"—take me—"

"—us all—at once—"

"—just—if you can!"

He could hear raised voices from the party hall upstairs, but not clearly. Treize decided to quickly make his way while the second floor was preoccupied, and hurried. Soon he passed by the body of an old man buried in the snow.

First, he looked up.

He could see the jutting third-floor balcony and the light seeping from between the curtains of the second floor window. The yelling stopped and silence once again came over the villa.

"..."

Treize looked ahead once more and continued. He passed the north side of the foundation and arrived at the opposite side of the building from Lillia.

There was another mountain of snow on the east side of the building from the slanted roof, but none of it was piled on the steep stone steps under the eaves. Still bending forward, he made his way with muffled steps.

When he reached the corner, Treize moved with heightened caution. He crouched there and quietly peered around the foundation.

"..."

On the south side of the villa, on the opposite side from the lake, was a plaza about 20 meters square. One of the villa's double doors was wide open. The light from the lobby passed by the square and lit the party hall. Though the lights on the walls were off, it was not difficult to tell what was happening inside.

In a corner of the plaza was a mid-sized bus half-buried in the snow, up to the base of the frame.

There was no one there. However—

"..."

Treize looked at the area before the wide-open door. Fresh footprints were pressed on the thin layer of snow. Someone must have been walking there to keep watch on the area.

Treize pulled himself back around the corner and sighed softly.

Then he mumbled,

"I wonder if she's counted to a hundred yet?"

"One hundred."

Finishing her countdown, Lillia slowly squatted and opened the bag on the landing.

The bomb was wrapped up in ragged cloth. She pulled off the rag and wrapped her gloved hand around it. Though it was dark, she could feel the liquid and the second bottle inside the larger one.

"Please..."

Lillia took out the bottle and placed it on the stone steps.

Clatter. The bottle made a clear noise the moment she put it down.

"..."

Lillia froze. Not allowing herself to even breathe, she stood still for about three seconds before scanning her surroundings. She saw no one. She heard nothing.

"Phew..."

Lillia wrapped up the empty bag in the rag and stuffed it into her other bag, then stood on the landing with the bomb cradled in both hands.

Then, she placed it inside the gate Treize had opened, on a thick layer of ash. Perhaps she was more careful this time, or perhaps the ash was cushioning the impact—this time, the bottle was silent.

Lillia took out the box of matches from her coat pocket. She held the box in her left hand and pulled off her right glove with her teeth, letting it drop to the ground.

And with her right hand, she took out two matches and lit them simultaneously.

Hesitantly, Lillia reached out toward the rag sticking out of the bottle.

"..."

The rag caught fire easily and began to burn—weakly, but brightly.

"..."

Lillia dropped the matches in the ash and looked inside the gate. The fire lit up the grey bricks. Soon, the flame grew larger. It looked much brighter because Lillia's eyes were used to the dark.

"All right. Time to make my getaway..." She mumbled, sliding the box of matches into her pocket. But it slipped out of her hand and fell on the ground. Matches scattered all over the stone steps.

"Argh, why now?!"

Lillia ignored the matches and shut the gate with her gloved left hand. She was very careful at the end to make sure it made no sound.

"Let's go..."

She picked up the glove from the ground. Pulling it over her right hand, she hurried down the steps—

"Ack!"

But she slipped and landed on her rear.

"Agh! Urk! Gah! Whoa!"

With a rather loud scream.

After sliding down about five stone steps, Lillia landed feet-first in a pile of snow at the northwestern corner of the building. The bag on her shoulder went flying and landed in the snow.

"Ow..."

Lying spread-eagle on her back, she found herself looking up at the sky. The north wall of the villa was at the edge of her vision. Suddenly, the world grew brighter. The curtains opened at the second floor party hall and light spilled on the falling snow.

"Oh no!"

Lillia hurried to her feet. And rather than head for the woods as she originally planned, she clung to the foundation. Just as Treize had done before, she pressed her back to the wall and stretched her hands out to the side.

"What was that?"

She could hear a man's voice from upstairs. It was clearly not Treize. She could hear someone raise the window and lock it open.

A flashlight from the window shone on the spot Lillia had been lying in until three seconds earlier. The powerful beams illuminated the falling snow.

"What's going on?"

She heard another male voice. It was calm and solemn.

"..."

Lillia crept sideways like a crab, eager to get even a little further from the light.

"I thought I heard something."

"..."

Silently, Lillia carried on. Holding back the urge to break into a run, she moved as slowly and as quietly as possible. She was almost in tears.

"Maybe it was snow falling from the roof?"

"Maybe..."

"Yeah! That's it!" Lillia cried in a whisper.

"Check where you can. It came from near the wall."

"Right."

"Eek!"

The beam of light flew toward Lillia.

Lillia crept sideways like she had never done before. Soon, her hand on the wall touched thin air. She had reached the corner of the building. Quickly, Lillia turned and headed to the east side of the villa.

The second she crouched on the stone steps, the light from the flashlight hit the building corner. It stopped just a few centimeters short of Lillia's feet, right before her eyes.

"..."

And it soon disappeared.

Almost crying, Lillia took several deep breaths. And she slowly looked behind her. She rose to her feet and silently crept forward, eventually spotting a familiar figure.

"Soon... It's just about time..."

As Treize waited for the bomb to go off, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"WHOA!"

His scream was swallowed by the explosion.

Chapter 6: The Bomb

The bomb exploded exactly on schedule.

Everything worked as Treize planned. The rag burned, the oil in the first bottle caught fire, the candle wax melted, the paper burned, the fuse burned, and the gunpowder exploded.

But the bomb was much more powerful than Treize expected.

The moment it went off, something terrifying happened in the deserted kitchen.

The brick stove in the corner of the kitchen shattered with a deafening noise. The bricks flew everywhere, into the living room and the ceiling and the opposite wall, as they rebounded and disintegrated.

A shockwave resounded through the building. All the utensils on the kitchen counter fell to the floor. The half-finished apple pie flew up, plate and all, and did four and a half spins before scattering in midair.

Oil that had not yet burned also splattered everywhere, scattering tiny sparks all over the kitchen. An apron someone had left behind caught fire. A cutting board and the window frames began to burn.

Most of the kitchen's windows were shattered in the blast. Black smoke rose out the windows.

In the instant after the explosion.

The floor shook and the windows rattled in the interrogation room.

"What was that?" Laurie gasped.

"Under us. It's the kitchen." Elvar said calmly.

"..."

"Wh-what in the world...?"

Fiona and Benedict were both rattled by the explosion, the former freezing up in surprise. Elvar sat them both down in their chairs and opened the door. He hollered at the man in the hall and the guard they stationed in the lobby.

"Check the kitchen! If there's a fire, put it out immediately!"

"Got it!"

"Right"

He did not forget to give orders to the two men who came out of the party hall.

"It's the kitchen. One of you go. The others keep watching the hostages. Shoot anyone who resists."

Elvar turned his attention back to the interrogation room.

"What's going on, Elvar?"

"I think something exploded in the kitchen." Elvar answered Laurie's question, and turned to Benedict.

"Do you use gas in this building?"

"No. Gas tanks are too bothersome to carry, so we use firewood and coal still."

"Then this explosion could not have happened." Elvar declared.

"Well, yes, but..."

Benedict frowned.

In the instant after the explosion.

Not much of the shockwave affected Treize and the person who tapped his shoulder, who were on the opposite side of the building.

Once the sound subsided, Treize realized that Lillia was the one behind him and raised his voice.

"What are you doing here, Lillia?!"

"I couldn't help it, okay?!" Lillia retorted with equal indignation.

Treize clicked his tongue. Then he made a decision.

"I'm climbing up! You get away!"

There was no one standing guard at the front doors. Treize leapt out from the corner and began to scramble up the gutter on the right side of the southern wall. The metal piping was secured in just the right places that he could find footholds and handholds on the way.

Even as he made a racket, Treize squeaked up the wall like an inchworm. Soon, he was beside the third floor balcony.

"Hah!"

He threw himself toward the edge, about a meter away. And he landed safely.

Not a moment later,

"Move!"

"Huh?"

Treize was crushed under Lillia, who leapt over afterwards.

She had climbed the gutter as well and landed atop him.

"Urgh!"

Treize landed chest-first on the balcony floor.

"Ow... Lillia? What are you doing here? Why'd you follow me? I told you to run!"

"Stupid Treize! They would have caught me for sure if I stayed down there! The searchlight! It's looking for us! You have any idea how scary it was? I thought I was going to die!"

"But still!"

"This is hide-and-seek, and our lives are on the line! I remembered something—I'm scared of hide-and-seek! A long time ago, I was playing with Mom when I hid in the closet, and she opened up the door with a flashlight under her face and her hair all down and said, 'Found you!'. I cried! I was scared of blond hair for ages after that!"

Lillia was panicked out of her wits.

"Er... I don't think your trauma there has anything to do with the situation." Treize said calmly in spite of his awe.

"Shut up, stupid!" Lillia snapped, launching a physical attack. She smacked Treize with her hands as hard as she could.

"Ow! Hey! Stop that! Okay, okay! Please, stop..."



Treize surrendered. Lillia finally lowered her hands after a good beating.

"A-anyway, let's hurry up and get inside!"

"Right. ...What did I do to deserve this...?"

Treize stood and stepped forward, opening the door leading into the hallway. The door opened, beyond which was the dark third floor corridor.

"Take off your coat. We'll leave all the wet stuff on the balcony."

"R-right."

Treize and Lillia quickly pulled off their coats. Their hats, gloves, and boots as well. Then they rolled them up in a ball, placed them in a corner of the balcony, and entered the villa.

The kitchen.

"My word..."

"What a mess."

"..."

The three men were lost for words.

It looked like it would be faster to rebuild the kitchen from the ground up than to repair everything. Bricks, tableware, and food were scattered everywhere, and oil was burning and splattering. A thick layer of smoke clouded the room.

One person went out to the lobby and called Elvar in the interrogation room. Elvar stuck out his head.

"What's going on?"

"The kitchen's a mess. Everything's on fire. We should put it out immediately. Where is the fire extinguisher?"

Elvar went back to the interrogation room and turned to Benedict.

"We need the fire extinguisher."

"A fire extinguisher? For what? Has something happened?"

"No questions. Just tell me where it is."

Benedict informed him that it was in the cabinet under the stairs in the lobby. Elvar conveyed the message to the men on the first floor.

"Understood."

The men took out the fire extinguisher, a large metal bottle atop a wheeled base. They brought it to the kitchen and quickly activated it.

Several minutes later came a man in combat gear, covered in splotches of white solution.

"We've extinguished the flames. It looks like something exploded in the stove and sent oil flying everywhere. We found bricks lodged on the other side of the kitchen."

Elvar said nothing, silently falling into thought.

"Hm? Were you baking an explosive pie for us, Queen Francesca?" Laurie wondered. Fiona ignored the question and asked another.

"Is anyone hurt?"

"No." Replied the man.

Fiona breathed a sigh of relief, to which Laurie hissed, "Hypocrite".

"Leader." Elvar said, turning to Laurie.

"What is it?"

"I think we should have one more look around the villa exterior."

"What?"

"Just in case, Leader. Please. Your permission."

Laurie met Elvar's grim gaze.

"All right. Go with them. We'll halt the interrogation for now."

"Understood." Elvar replied, drawing a handgun.

He disarmed the safety on the cocked gun. The red dot that signaled the gun was ready to fire appeared.

"I-I think we managed..."

"Although we didn't need *both* of us here."

"Hey! I was scared down there, okay?"

"All right, all right... Ow!"

"What's wrong?"

"I hit my head on the doorknob. At least now I know where the door is. This way."

Treize and Lillia crawled on all fours down the dark hallway and stopped at one of the doors.

Treize opened the door and entered. Lillia followed after him. Their footsteps were thankfully dampened by the thick carpet on the floor.

In the dark room, where the curtain was closed, Treize began to look for something.

"There."

Soon, he turned on a red light. He was holding a small flashlight with a red filter. Treize cast the light at his own feet, and Lillia came closer.

If things weren't so dire, Lillia might have wondered how Treize managed to find the flashlight in the dark in what was supposed to be the queen's husband's room, but she had a more important question on mind.

"All right. Now what about the radio?"

The red light did not extend very far. Lillia had no way of seeing the room's layout.

Treize turned the light to a closet in a corner of the room. And he slowly opened the door, which went all the way up to the ceiling. The right half of the closet was a dresser, large enough for a person to hide inside. Men's coats and leather jackets were hung up there.

The rest of the closet was used as a bookshelf. That was where the radio was. A radio about 50 centimeters square sat on the shelf. There were rows upon rows of dials and frequency measures on the control panel, and a speaker was installed on top of it. Next to it hung a headset, and in front of it a microphone.

The radio looked rather eerie in the red light.

"Wow." Lillia breathed, overjoyed.

Treize got on one knee before the radio. He pressed the power button. With a low, quiet hum, the little window on the radio began to glow a murky orange.

"Great! Now call for help. Those guys are finished."

"Just a minute... we have to give this a bit of time." Treize muttered bitterly.

They waited in silence.

"I knew it. The woman's body is gone."

"Shit!"

Elvar stood with a gun in his right hand and a flashlight in his left. Beside him was a skinny man with a name card that read 'Jake', holding a submachine gun in his right hand.

They were both in combat gear and hats with ear flaps, standing by the north side of the foundation. At their feet was the body of the old man wrapped in the curtain, which they had dragged out of the snow. But the woman's body was nowhere to be found.

"She did it on purpose. She provoked the Leader so she would get shot near the window. Then she leaned over as she was hit, jumping outside."

Jake scanned the area, astonished.

"So she twisted herself in midair to use the body to break her fall? Unbelievable..."

"Expect nothing less from a former member of the royal guard." Elvar said, the faintest hint of a smile rising to his lips.

"Fanatics. The lot of them." Jake hissed. "They would die and suffer for their queen."

"The best soldiers in the world."

"Do you think she went to the lakeshore to report this?" Jake asked nervously. Elvar was calm.

"Not in her condition, no."

"Then what about the explosion?"

"Their purpose wasn't destruction or fire. It was a distraction. From the timer mechanism on the bomb, it's likely she's still nearby."

"Is she armed, do you think?"

"Potentially. But she'll never rescue the queen alone."

"True. Then did she infiltrate the villa when the bomb went off? The bus is still parked where they left it."

"We had a guard posted at the doors. An injured woman isn't likely to have snuck inside. But..."

Elvar trailed off, walking toward the northwestern corner of the villa. Lillia and Treize's footprints had been erased completely by the snow and the bricks that had come flying during the explosion.

"Hm..."

But Elvar's keen eyes spotted something. The second bag Lillia had dropped when she fell was nearly buried in the snow, but the shoulder strap was slightly exposed.

Elvar gingerly cleared the snow and pulled out the bag. Checking to make sure it was not a trap, he opened the bag and looked inside. He knew what the bottle was the moment he laid eyes on it. When he showed it to Jake, the latter also understood what it was.

"She must have made this somewhere." Said Elvar. Jake furrowed his brow.

"Where? I didn't see any of these things in the villa when we looked around earlier. I even checked the basement, and it was mostly foodstuffs there."

"Who knows? But the construction is simple. And the fuse is short. Only a few minutes at most."

"Then she must still be nearby."

"Exactly."

"She might even be watching us now."

Elvar did not respond. He handed the flashlight to Jake, armed the safety on his gun, and stuck it into his belt. Then, in less than ten seconds, he dismantled Treize's bomb. He spilled the oil onto the snow and threw the bottle with the gunpowder into the snowy woods. The bottle flew off and hit a tree, shattering into pieces.

"Let's go."

Elvar began to climb the stone steps on the west side of the building. Jake followed after him, alert. When they reached the landing with the blown-up metal gate and the disfigured foundation, Jake wondered out loud,

"What now?"

"We proceed as planned. We interrogate the queen and wait for the snow to stop. Then we depart."

"Understood."

"But—"

"Hm?"

"We can't have anyone get shot in the back before that. We're doing one more thorough search of the villa. Especially the third floor."

"All right! It's working." Treize cheered, putting on the headset. There weren't any extras for Lillia to use. Treize picked up the microphone and pressed the call button.

<Kunst Airport air traffic control, do you copy?> He said, the microphone held up close to his mouth. Treize took his finger off the call button and waited for about three seconds for a response. If they sent an answer, he would hear it. But—

"Is it not working?" Asked Lillia. Treize tried again.

<Kunst Airport air traffic control, do you copy?>

<Kunst Airport air traffic control, do you copy?>

Treize's voice crackled from the speaker.

On the winter-only airport on Lake Ras was a small but sturdy building. It was brought in by sled every winter to be used as an air traffic control center and a residence for whoever was manning the station.

Inside the building was a messy room with tables, chairs, and a large radio. It was a little dim, but the light was on. But there was no one there. The curtains were closed and the coal stove filled the lonely room with heat.

<Hey! Is anyone there?>

Treize's voice once again filled the room. a second later, the door opened. A man in his forties wearing a thick suit came inside. In his hand was a steaming mug.

"Damn it, can't a man get some tea in peace? Let the thing steep a bit..."

The air traffic controller grumbled as he crossed the room and sat himself down by the radio.

<Is anyone there?! Answer me!> Treize barked.

"Yes, yes. I'm listening. You couldn't land anything in this snow anyway. If you don't have the fuel to stand by, just give up on the party here and land yourself in Elitesa or something." The air traffic controller mumbled at a crawl, assuming the transmission was from an aeroplane preparing to descend. He pulled the microphone toward his mouth and pressed the call button.

<Yes, this is Kunst Airport. How can I help you?>

<Great! Hey, listen up. This is important, all right?> Treize said over the speaker.

"Talk about arrogant..." The air traffic controller groaned.

<The royal villa is un->

The voice stopped there. Communication had been cut off.

"What the?" The air traffic controller frowned, and spoke again.

<I'm not sure what you're trying to say. Please try again.>

There was no answer.

<I repeat. Your previous communication was unclear. Please try again.>

No answer.

The air traffic controller repeated himself three more times. But no one responded.

"What the heck... don't tell me they crashed?"

Still under the wrong impression, the man frowned.

"Not like I can do anything about it, but still..."

He mumbled, taking a sip of tea. He looked into the cup.

"It's watery..."

'The royal villa is under attack. Armed intruders are holding the queen hostage. Contact the police and the royal guard immediately and head to the villa', Treize had tried to say. But—

<The royal villa is un->

At that moment,

"Ugh!"

He turned off the microphone and stopped.

"Eek!" Lillia screamed softly, also realizing what was happening.

A light came on in the hallway. It shone faintly through the glass in the door, but it was blinding to Lillia and Treize because they had been in the dark. The light made clear that the room was small and humble, furnished with a bed, a desk, and a closet.

"S-s-s-s-s-someone's coming..." Lillia stammered. Treize turned off the radio's main power. It hummed briefly and trembled before going silent. The light on it also went off.

Thump. Thump. Thump. They could hear multiple sets of footsteps walking up the stairs. Then—

"Search— —them—"

They heard a deep male voice.

"—start— —left—"

"Understood."

"Don't let your guard down."

The voices became clearer and clearer.

"Not good..." Treize clicked his tongue. The first room to the left was the one they were in.

"H-h-h-here? They're going to—"

Treize turned to Lillia, who was pale as a sheet.

"Sorry!"

And with a whispered apology, he picked her up and rushed into the closet.

The door opened with a powerful kick.

The door loudly slammed against the other side of the wall as it swung open.

With guns at the ready, Elvar and Jake searched every corner of the room with the flashlights they carried in their left hands.

Powerful beams of light scanned the room. There was a bed, a desk, and a large closet with the doors firmly shut. There was no one in the room.

"Turn on the light." Elvar ordered. Jake pressed the switch on the wall by the door.

A fluorescent light lit up the rectangular room. The layout was clear for the men to see. The bed was ahead of the door, about 3 meters away, and the closet beyond it. By the window to the left, about 5 meters away, was the desk. There were no other doors in the room.

The men fixed their flashlights to their belts and stepped inside, holding up their guns.

The bed was made to perfection, almost like at a hotel. There was no sign that anyone had lain there. On the desk were several books and a small watch, along with a few writing utensils.

Elvar's sharp gaze moved up and down the room along with the gun he held in his hands.

"..."

And his eyes fell on the closet.

Jake, who checked that there was no one under the bed, also turned to the closet.

"Did you check inside?"

"No." Jake replied.

Elvar placed his right arm against his body. Keeping the gun close, he slowly reached for the closet door with his left hand. Jake pointed his submachine gun at the center of the closet.

Elvar pulled on the door.

It did not open. The door rattled quietly.

Elvar took his hand off the door and took a step back. Then he held the gun with both hands and took aim at the closet.

"If you're in there, come on out."

There was no answer. Five seconds later, Elvar spoke again.

"Come out."

There was still no answer. A second later, Elvar pulled the trigger.

Three shots in succession. The gunshots seemed to blend into one noise.

Then three more. The three rounds were fired before even the first of the shell casings could reach the floor.

And the third set of three. Even more holes were blown in the closet. Elvar fired off the last five shots in succession. In less than three seconds since the first bullet was fired, fourteen holes were left in the closet.

Elvar left one shot in the magazine and let it drop. Then he took out another magazine from the pouch at his waist and pushed it into the gun.

With his left foot Elvar kicked the door. It slowly opened.

"..."

There was no one there.

Inside were bullet-riddled coats, jackets, books removed from their covers, and a radio that had short-circuited from the inside.

"Phew..." Jake breathed.

"We'll check the next room. Clear out every hiding place there could possibly be."

"Right."

"No one should be on this floor. Pull the trigger as soon as you find something."

"Understood."

The men left the room with the light still on.

In the empty room, books riddled with holes fell in a heap.

At the top of the closet, in the area previously occupied by the books, was a slightly skewed piece of plywood. Peering out from behind it was a pair of eyes.

"Damn it... can't believe they put holes in my jackets..." Treize grumbled. "Bastards. They're gonna pay for this. We'll see who's laughing at the end."

He was on top of the closet, in a dark crawlspace between the ceiling and the roof, surveying the room beyond.

"Are you all right, Lillia?" Treize asked as he turned on the red-tinted flashlight and looked back.

"Please... not the blond ghost... not the blond one..." Lillia muttered blankly, her hands over her ears.

"We're all right, right...?"

Treize decided to breathe a sigh of relief.

Several minutes passed by that way. As Lillia and Treize silently sat frozen in the crawlspace, the men continued their violent search. At times they heard furniture toppling and gunfire.

And eventually,

"That's enough. Let's go. Leave the lights on."

"Right."

The men finally went down the stairs.

"Reporting in, Leader."

When Elvar returned to the interrogation room on the second floor, he gave Laurie a brief rundown of what he had found. About the bomb, about the missing woman, and about how the third floor seemed to be empty.

"That witch..." Laurie seethed. Fiona, though her wrists were bound, placed her fists on her own forehead and exhaled.

Elvar continued.

"The remaining bomb, however, may simply be a plant. She may have intentionally left behind a bomb with a shorter fuse while she set up one with a longer fuse before making her getaway. To force us to waste time searching the house."

"What a nuisance. I'll put a bullet in her forehead next time I see her."

"We should continue as planned, Leader. Resume the interrogation and make preparations."

"Of course." Laurie nodded, and turned to Fiona and Benedict once more.

"Preparations? What for?" Asked Benedict.

"Isn't it obvious? Preparations to leave this place."

"You're leaving?"

"Before dawn. We can't stay here forever. We're going as soon as the snow stops."

"Please, feel free to move in. We have room for one more here. Would you like to file for an address change?" Benedict joked.

"No." Laurie replied, unamused. Fiona spoke up.

"So you're finally leaving us? I'm glad to hear that."

Laurie looked Fiona in the eye.

"Don't relax just yet. We'll be taking you and your husband as hostages. We still don't have the answers we want."

"And if we refuse?"

"We'd prefer if you'd follow us, but if you insist, we'll drug the both of you and drag you along the snow."

"What will you do after taking us two? The snowplow from the palace will come in the morning. They will find out about you immediately and you will be wanted by every police force on the continent." Said Benedict.

Laurie grinned as though she'd been waiting for this question. She turned to Elvar.

"Can I answer, Elvar? I want to say this myself."

"Yes." Elvar said.

Laurie met Fiona's gaze. And she smiled almost as though she were making a love confession.

"Let me tell you what we'll do, Queen Francesca. First we'll drug your servants and put them to sleep, then we'll take you and your husband as we leave. We'll go down the hill and onto the lake, and go to the airport without passing through Kunst. It won't take us more than two hours. By the time we watch the sunrise on the aeroplane we rented under a fake name and land on the Roxchean plains..." Laurie trailed off dramatically, awaiting Fiona's reaction. "...this place will be in ashes. We're leaving a timed device here to start a fire. Blackened corpses in a burnt-out building are nigh-impossible to identify and count. People will believe the queen, her husband, and even us visitors lost our lives to an unfortunate accident."

Laurie was finished. But Fiona barely paled. She simply stared at the younger woman across the table with a calm look, rooted in an indecipherable mix of sympathy or pity.

Several seconds of silence followed.

"I was expecting a better reaction. Or have you already given up? That would be a surprise." Laurie said before Fiona spoke.

Fiona finally opened her mouth.

"Miss."

It was a simple call.

"Hm? Me?"

"Yes. *Miss*." Fiona said with a smile. Laurie smirked belligerently.

"I must have made you quite cross if you're going to the trouble of calling me that. I'm flattered."

"No, not at all. It just occurred to me how pitiful you were."

"Ha!" Laurie snorted. "Please, my men and I don't need any hypocritical sympathy—"

"That's not it." Fiona cut her off. As Laurie narrowed her eyes dubiously, Fiona declared, "I'm not talking about you and your men. I'm talking about you and your father."

"Wh-what...?" Laurie stammered. Elvar sighed quietly from behind Benedict.

"You and your father have the same eyes."

Laurie stared at Fiona, stunned.

"The eyes of a pitiful person who's convinced that they can do anything. That everything will go as they planned."

Meeting Laurie's chilling glare, Fiona continued calmly. Benedict watched both her and Laurie, on either side of his line of sight.

"You will *not* insult my father!" Laurie cried as she stood, slamming the table.

Fiona also got to her feet, her hands still tied.

With the map of Ikstova between them, they met eyes at the very same height.

"Enough of your foolishness, *Miss*."

"..."

"...No. Let me call you by name, Claire. Claire Nichto."

Chapter 7: The Secret of Ikstova

"Are you okay, Lillia?"

"Hm? Yeah, still alive."

"Are you calm?"

"Yep... The blond ghost is gone. Probably back to blonde-land."

"That's good to hear."

"Where are we? It's so dark I can't see a thing. And it's cold. Is this place safe?"

"We're in the attic. Or maybe it's more like a crawlspace. There aren't any stairs that come up here, so they probably haven't noticed this place."

"You know a lot about this building, huh? I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out you built this house."

"Thanks. But are you okay? It's pretty dark and cramped in here."

"Yeah. All that gunfire snapped me out of it. Damn it... I thought I was going to have a heart attack back there! We're not going to let them get away with this!"

"Yeah. That's the spirit."

"But now what do we do?"

"..."

"Well? Treize?"

"Yeah. What do we do?"

"Huh?"

"The radio got hit. It's gone. Now we can't contact outside."

"Then we'll just have to come up with a new plan. We'll head to Kunst even if we have to wade through all the snow."

"I guess that's our only option... And if we're going to walk anyway, it might be faster to head for the airport. But..."

"But?"

"This time, we're stuck in here."

"Huh?"

"It's the opposite of what happened before. We can't leave this place without getting caught."

"...No way!"

"It feels like everything we've done so far's been having the opposite effect. If I'd known this would happen, I would have just dragged myself to the airport to begin with..."

"Get a hold of yourself, Treize. This is no time to be moping around."

"But..."

"Don't lose hope! The queen might be desperately fighting them alone!"

"How?"

"Er... well... on a psychological level? Yeah?"

"Don't ask me."

"...No. Let me call you by name, Claire. Claire Nichto."

For ten seconds, silence enveloped the room. Fiona and Laurie glared at one another.

Elvar moved first.

"Sit her down." He ordered Kirk, who stood behind Fiona. Kirk gently lifted the chair and put it down.

Fiona slowly took a seat. As did Laurie.

"Don't let her provoke you, Leader." Said Elvar. Laurie gave him a smile.

"I know. I'm in control now."

Then she turned to Fiona.

"When did you notice, Queen Francesca? Surely not at the very beginning."

"Just now. When you said so happily that you would raze this building."

"I see." Laurie said. "I was going to tell you sooner or later, anyway. Let me introduce myself again. I am Claire Nichto. The daughter of Owen Nichto, who killed your parents and put two bullets into your head."

Claire Nichto spoke proudly. Then, she angrily raised her voice.

"And! I am the daughter of Owen Nichto, whom you murdered! Queen Francesca and Carr Benedict, Hero of the Mural! How I despised you these eighteen years!"

"I understand. Now I see why you do not like us." Benedict said in a leisurely tone. Claire suddenly grinned.

"You have no idea how hard it was to hold myself back from tearing out your throats the moment we first met."

"My goodness." Benedict said, for a second distracted by Claire's beautiful smile. But Fiona's voice quickly brought him back to reality.

"So did your father tell you about the treasure? You were only six years old at the time."

"Yes and no." Claire said plainly, showing neither anger nor hatred. "In the end, Father never fulfilled his dreams. He was always a lover of history. And as he learned from our forefathers and the people around him, he vaguely noticed the existence of a treasure. It was hearsay, told by someone who worked at the palace and passed down the family line."

"So that is when he found this map." Said Benedict.

"I suppose." Claire replied. "Eventually, Father became a politician to live out his dream of serving the country. And when he had the once-in-a-lifetime chance to meet the previous queen, he brought it up. That was twenty-nine years ago. The Lestki Island conflict was in full force at the time, and no one would have been surprised if a second Great War had taken place. Though he did not know what the treasure was, Father implored for its revelation to the public for the sake of Roxche and Ikstova, if it would help in the war effort."

"And what did my mother say?" Asked Fiona. Claire's expression darkened.

"Your mother, Queen Calensia, denied the treasure's existence with a laugh and declared that she would pretend she did not hear what my father said. But the treasure does exist. Calensia deemed my father a dangerous element and worked behind the scenes to prevent him from declaring candidacy in the next election. She also canceled his lumber export permit. Left without work, Father was essentially exiled from his beloved Ikstova."

Fiona was silent.

"Surprised, Queen Francesca? Your mother was an unbelievable woman. Heartbroken, Father managed to survive with the help of the Terreur Foundation in the Capital District. But he could have very well died far from his beloved home. You wouldn't have known that, though. You were only ten at the time." Claire said, her tone suddenly taking a turn for the sarcastic.

"But that does not mean it is right to attack the palace with an armed group and kill many people." Benedict chimed in quickly. Claire did not respond.

"Let me tell you what happened then. When Father attacked the palace to seek revenge, he held Calensia and her husband at gunpoint and demanded to know what the treasure was. But they did not confess. Not even when their own daughter was threatened with death. It must be one incredible treasure if they were willing to go so far. Do you remember that moment, Queen Francesca?"

"No. Luckily, I don't have any memories of the time."

"I see... lucky indeed. I do."

"What?"

"I remember the moment Father fell. I can still clearly hear the sound of his head breaking against the stone-paved street."

Fiona's breath caught in her throat. She then asked,

"You... were there?"

"Yes." Claire replied immediately. "I was there, eighteen years ago. I was in the crowd. Being a six-year-old, I had to ride on someone's shoulders to see Father on the balcony."

"Ah. Yes." Elvar said from behind Benedict.

Benedict leaned his head back. He saw Elvar's stern face upside-down.

"Though Father did not accomplish his goals with the attack on the palace, the incompetent Ikstovan police never suspected him. And once the fuss had died down, Father used the support of the Terreur Foundation to return to politics in Ikstova. And he dreamed of finding the treasure someday on his own. That was when some foolish politician began to rave about declaring independence from Roxche. Father went out to strike down his arguments. I asked Elvar to sneak me to the rally that day so I could watch my father. How many times did I regret my decision?" Claire said in one breath, before adding, "Although that's all in the past now."

"I see..." Fiona muttered. Claire's tone became harsh.

"I don't need your sympathy! The dead don't come back to life!"

Then, her expression softened.

"But I would like to thank you, Queen Francesca. I've wanted to thank you for a very long time."

"What? You want to thank me?" Fiona repeated, flabbergasted. Claire nodded.

"Yes. Father asked two things of you that day."

"He did."

"One was to keep my mother and myself out of the mess. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for so foolishly adhering to that promise. Mother and I were completely oblivious, then. But when you sent us to the Capital District, the lawyer gave us this map and Father's notes, saying it was his will. There we learned everything. And we despised the royal family. Thank you for giving me this chance at revenge, Queen Francesca."

"..."

Francesca stared silently at Claire. Claire narrowed her eyes and continued.

"You never did do the second thing Father asked you for. But don't worry—I'll make sure to fulfill it in his stead."

"..."

"That's all for the past." Laurie said, getting to her feet. She walked around the table and stood by Elvar, who was behind Benedict.

As Benedict and Fiona watched, Claire held out a hand to Elvar.

"The 9mm, Elvar."

Elvar paused, but he soon pulled out the handgun and, with his fingers around the front, handed it to Claire.

Claire cocked the gun.

"Originally..."

And she took aim at the side of Benedict's head as he sat in his chair.

"...We were planning to take you both. But I suppose it would be fine to just take the queen."

Benedict looked up and made a point of blinking, his eyes on the muzzle and Claire's face.

"Hm? It seems like I am in danger."

"If you hadn't poked your nose into this business, Hero of the Mural, the queen would have lived in obscurity all her life. Then none of us would have gone through this tragedy."

"Are you going to shoot me? The queen will not tell you the truth then."

"I can take my time grilling the queen later. We can use truth serum, torture, anything—the possibilities are endless. I'm just doing this to make her suffer. I'll cover that calm face with your blood. Any last words, Hero of the Mural?" Asked Claire.

"Yes." Fiona said.

"Hm?"

Claire turned.

"I wasn't asking you."

"But I will tell you, Claire Nichto. I'll tell you my secret." Fiona smiled, tilting her head.

"Aha. Yes. I think you can say it now. They will be very surprised. Please say it." Benedict nodded. Claire made a dubious face.

"...Fine. I'll listen to this secret of yours. But I want something interesting, or your face won't look the same again."

Claire armed the safety on her gun and handed it to Elvar, the barrel pointed upwards. Elvar took it without a word. Claire passed by Benedict and stood before Fiona, who sat in the chair.

Fiona looked up at Claire. Claire looked down at Fiona.

"Then let me tell you something interesting, Claire. I'm sure you'll enjoy this." Said Fiona, and smiled. "I know nothing. Absolutely nothing at all."

"..."

Claire frowned.

And several seconds later, she asked irritatedly,

"What kind of secret is that?"

"A national secret. The biggest in Ikstova."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No. I don't know a thing. Not about the Treasure of Ikstova, and not much about the royal family, for that matter."

"This is a waste of time. You're only extending your husband's life by a few minutes."

"It's true. Do you know why?"

"..."

"It's simple. I am not Francesca."

"What?"

Claire gaped. Elvar cast a glance at Fiona. Kirk also looked curiously at her profiled face.

"I am Fiona. Did you hear my husband call me 'Fi' earlier?"

"...What does that have to do with anything? Who is Fiona?"

"Francesca's sister. Her twin sister."

"Wha-"

Claire froze mid-word, her eyes widening. A shadow came over her face.

"My sister, Princess Francesca, narrowly escaped the burning palace and was rescued by Doctor Bain. But she passed away two days later. As you know, the royal family allows the monarch to have only one child. So I was never formally recognized, instead raised as a normal girl in the village. I only realized that your father was the culprit when I found his cufflink in her corpse and when I saw the advertisement for the political rally. Benedict came up with the idea to pass me off as Francesca, while we were on our way to Kunst."

"What... did you say...?"

"May I continue? I chose to deceive my people. With my sister's pendant around my neck. Everyone who lived in the village where I grew up was a former member of the royal guard. They were gathered there for my sake. They told me everything I should know if I were to masquerade as Francesca so that I could rebuild the royal family."

No one reacted. Not Claire, not Elvar, not Kirk. They simply listened, dazed.

Only Benedict seemed to enjoy the astonishment on the back of Laurie's head and Kirk's profiled face. He recited a theatrical line in Bezelese.

"Alas, the door of truth opens'."

Fiona continued.

"The royal family's treasure? The secret that's been passed down the line for four hundred years? When you first told me about this, I wondered what you were talking about. I followed Benedict's lead and led you on to get more information, but it looks like you know more about the treasure than I ever did, Claire."

"Wh... wha...?"

Claire stammered meaninglessly, stunned. Fiona landed the final blow.

"Thank you for all the information."

"Th-then..."

Claire finally mustered the strength for words. She looked down at Fiona in a daze.

"You're a fake... And... you fooled Father..."

"Yes, that's right. I'm sorry."

"And you even fooled me..."

"Ah, I am very sorry. I also feel responsible." Benedict said cheerfully from behind her, not sounding apologetic in the least.

"I spoke briefly with Francesca before she passed. But she didn't say a thing about the treasure. She knew she didn't have much time left, but she said nothing. If my guess is right..." Fiona said, as nonchalant as though she were reflecting on a radio drama. "...the treasure probably doesn't amount to anything at all."

"Wha... you..."

Tears fell from Claire's eyes. They slid down her cheeks and fell droplet by droplet onto the carpet.

"You..."

Her tears scattered as she finally raised her voice.

"YOU FRAUD!"

At the same time, she punched Fiona in the face.

There was a dull thud as Fiona fell to the right, chair and all. Kirk grabbed her by the shoulders a second before she hit the carpet.

Benedict, who had a worried look on his face, silently applauded Kirk with his fingertips.



"That wasn't necessary!"

"...We can't have her die on us, Leader." Kirk said, helping Fiona up as she bled from a torn lip. He set the chair back upright and sat Fiona down. she quietly thanked him, but Kirk did not respond.

"Damned witch... damn you..."

Claire's fists trembled as she stared Fiona down.

Fiona looked up, meeting her gaze. Her left cheek was flushed and swollen, and the blood from her lip left red stains on her blouse.

"Did you find that interesting?" She said. "Ow..."

With her bound hands Fiona rubbed her cheek and lips.

"Is this true?" Elvar demanded, placing a hand on Benedict's shoulder. Benedict turned and nodded.

"Yes, it mostly is. Are you satisfied now? That is all for your important secret."

"My word... twins..." Elvar hissed.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you where you stand!" Claire cried, but Elvar turned to her.

"Leader."

"I will tear you to pieces and—"

"Miss!"

Claire finally came to her senses at Elvar's harsh voice and turned.

"It's 'Leader'!"

"You mustn't kill her, Leader."

"But—"

"You must be calm, Leader. Even if you kill the queen and her husband here..."

Fiona continued where Elvar left off.

"...then our child would go after you. That's all. I'm sure you understand that well."

"Indeed I do. I know! All! Too! Well!" Claire cried. Elvar, however, remained composed.

"If you kill them, Leader, Princess Meriel will become queen when she returns. And the outpouring of sympathy from the masses will only help her rebuild the royal family, restoring it as though nothing had ever happened. Then our efforts—your *father's* efforts—will have all been in vain."

"Then what do you propose?!"

"We should change our strategy, Leader. Take these two out of Ikstova as we originally planned. And then we'll announce the queen's fraudulent status to the world. Tell the people that, though royalty, she was not legally permitted to claim the throne. That she should never have been given the crown. If we cover up the assassinations and play our cards right with the people of Roxche, ending the royal line will only be a matter of time. After all, Iks's newfound economic success has made it quite a few enemies."

Elvar remained calculating to the end.

"..."

Claire said nothing. Five seconds passed.

"You're right. ...That's a great idea, Elvar." She said finally, smiling. "It's an amusing idea. We'll destroy every last shred of the royal family."

"I don't care if you announce the truth, as long as you don't take anyone's life. Can we please end this meaningless violence now?" Asked Fiona.

Claire stopped in her tracks for a moment.

"...No. This isn't even close to being finished."

She looked down at Fiona, shaking her head.

"You're still not broken. War doesn't end until one side acknowledges defeat or perishes completely."

* * *

"We can't just sit around here. We have to think of something." Treize said in the crawlspace.

"Yeah. Let's think." Lillia nodded.

They sat cross-legged in the dark. The flashlight cast a dim red light on them.

"Treize, you don't think those people are gonna sit on this villa and hold the place for good?"

"No way. People are going to get here by morning, and these people are probably expecting that."

"Then they're going to leave after all."

"Yeah. They'll leave the villa, and Ikstova. Most likely—actually, *definitely*—by aeroplane."

"Why?"

"If they're taking a car or a bus, they'd have to spend hours on the snowy road from Kunst to Elitesa. There's no way they'd settle for that with a chase potentially on their hands. And even if they started walking now, they could reach the airport before dawn."

"I see. Then we can move once they leave. They'll never expect to find us here, so we have to take them by surprise."

Treize nodded, though Lillia could barely see.

"Yeah... we'll do that." Treize mumbled. And he hung his head, falling silent.

Twenty seconds passed, and just as Lillia was finally about to break the silence, Treize looked up.

"I thought of something."

"Yeah?"

"There's a rifle with a scope in the queen's husband's room. It's the same model as mine. I'll use that and go after these people. I'll stand by on the balcony and wait for them to come outside. And once they're out, I'll tail them quietly. It won't be hard to go after them without them knowing because of all the snow."

"And then?"

"Once they get about 300 meters out onto the lake, where everything's flat, I'll take cover in the woods and snipe them in the back from higher ground."

"Will that really work?"

"I don't know. But that's the only way I can put up a fight with all of them. There's nowhere to take cover on the lake. The trees will keep me sheltered, and if I'm on high ground, I can hit them even if they're lying flat. They probably don't have any rifles on them. And even if we get into a shootout, my rifle's going to have longer range. I can say from deer hunting experience that I can make a 400-meter shot. With a handgun or a submachine gun, you'll only get accurate shots from 50 meters or less."

"I see. Then what about the queen? What if they take her with them?" Lillia asked the obvious question. Treize's tone grew heavy.

"They'll probably take her along as a hostage... So all I can do is make sure I don't hit her. I just have to be calm and shoot one person at a time."

"...So that's our only option, huh?" Lillia mumbled, then added that she was not opposed to it.

"You stay here, Lillia."

"We're splitting up *again*?"

"You're only going to get in the way." Treize said firmly.

"Tch. I guess you're right." Lillia said, pushing back her indignation. She then asked Treize what he would do afterwards.

"They might set fire to the building. Actually, I guarantee they will."

"Why? Oh. They want to get rid of evidence."

"Yeah. So the moment I go after them, you search the building and help anyone who's tied up or locked somewhere. And if the fire spreads, try to extinguish as much of it as you can. The fire extinguisher's in the cabinet under the stairs in the lobby."

"Right. Then what?"

"If you can't put out the fire, you just have to run for it. Tell the servants about how Auntie came to find us and tell them that Treize is going after the men. I told them my name when I rented the cottage, so they'll understand."

"Got it. Is there anything else?"

Treize thought for a moment before responding.

"That's all for the strategy meeting."

"Okay."

Lillia nodded and recited her course of action to herself to internalize the strategy. Treize listened without interrupting her. She had the plan memorized completely.

"Then I'm just going to drop down and grab some things. Help me take them up."

With that, Treize pushed the plywood aside and climbed down into the closet.

"Yeah. Man, it's so cold in here."

Lillia grumbled as she waited for Treize in the dark. She wasn't scared in the least. It was dead quiet inside, time passing by in stillness.

Soon, Treize returned and quietly called her name. The piece of plywood was pushed aside again and a faint light seeped into the crawlspace.

Lillia grabbed the objects Treize passed her from the closet and placed them on the floor of the crawlspace.

First came a hunting rifle equipped with a scope. It was identical to Treize's own rifle.

"I managed to find an extra rifle in the locker. The snow's easing up, too." Treize said.

Then followed a box of ammunition, a pair of binoculars, a small knapsack, and snow boots, a coat, and a hat to replace the ones they left on the balcony.

"These clothes belong to Princess Meriel, Lillia. You should be about the same size."

"Can I really wear these? Not my fault if she gets mad."

"This is an emergency. Just wear them."

Then Treize brought his own boots and coat from his own room, along with a clean white sheet from his bed.

"Is this a bedsheet?"

"I'll tell you what it's for later. And take these. We'll get some food in our bellies."

The last things Treize passed along were bottles of water and tins of chocolate.

"Where'd you get *these*?"

"From the queen's room."

"I oughta have you arrested. Let's eat."

Lillia received the water and the chocolate. Treize climbed back into the crawlspace. They quenched their thirst and gobbled up the chocolate out of the tins. Then they made preparations.

First, they loaded up the knapsack. Then they cut off the four corners of the bedsheet, folded it in half, and cut a hole through the middle.

"What is this, anyway?" Lillia asked between bites of chocolate, illuminating the sheet to help Treize.

"I'm going to put this on like a poncho. It'll keep me hidden in the snow." Treize replied. Lillia nodded.

Treize put on his coat and the knapsack, then covered himself with the bedsheet and tied it around his waist. It was loose enough that his figure was obscured.

Satisfied with the makeshift poncho, Treize took it off.

"We're ready, then. I'm going to climb back down to the room and keep an eye on them from the balcony. I'll signal you once they come outside, so you take your time and—"

"Yeah. I'll follow the plan." Lillia said, holding out her right hand in a fist.

"Huh?"

Confused, Treize cast light on Lillia's face. In the red light she was solemn and clearly worried.

"Treize. I know we're in a tough spot and I know we should give it our all. But..."

"But?"

"Be careful, okay? Who the heck dies on the first day of the year, you know? It's terrible! Got that?"

"...Yeah."

Treize also curled his right hand into a fist and bumped it against Lillia's.

Then he asked, as relaxed as he could be,

"If the plan works out, could you give me a prize?"

"Huh?"

Lillia gave him a quizzical look before bursting into laughter.

"C'mon, what am I supposed to give you? This is a really big job; you should be asking the queen for a prize."

Treize smiled.

"I guess you're right. Yeah. I'll do that."

Coming to an understanding, he balled up his left hand into a fist and placed it over his chest. A moment later, he unbuttoned his shirt and reached inside.

He pulled out a chain with a golden pendant hanging from it.

"Could you hold on to this for me?"

"Huh? Oh, the pendant. That reminds me, you still haven't kept the promise from last summer. Where's mine?"

"Oh, right. I just remembered. I can't give you mine, but..."

Treize held out the pendant.

"...Take care of it until things calm down. Keep it in your shirt pocket so you won't lose it."

"Oh, you're not giving it to me."

Though disappointed, Lillia took off her gloves and took it in her right hand.

"It's pretty."

"If anything happens to me, but the queen is safe, make sure to show this to her." Said Treize.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Fine, but... don't sound so ominous."

"Just in case, you know. Please."

Treize stared as Lillia pouted.

Even as she put the pendant in her pocket, Treize did not take his eyes off her. Soon, Lillia noticed his gaze.

"What?"

"I'm actually the pr-" He said in one breath, but stopped.

"Pr...?" Lillia repeated.

"N-no... it's nothing. Never mind."

He could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

"Now's not the time. I'll tell you later."

Treize stood.

"See you."

And with that, he climbed back into the closet and held out his hand. Lillia passed him the knapsack, the rifle, his coat, and the makeshift poncho.

Once he was ready to go, Treize looked up and held out a length of string. Lillia took it.

"Three tugs is the signal, right?"

"Yeah. I'll climb down the gutter from the balcony, so you take the stairs."

"Yeah. I'm not going to do anything dangerous, so you'd better not be reckless, either. Okay?"

"Got it."

"If you don't come back, I'm keeping the pendant."

"That might be a problem." Treize chuckled, and winked.

Then he headed for the balcony.

* * *

"It looks like the snow is letting up."

In the interrogation room, Claire peered out the curtains.

The snowflakes were smaller and the clouds were noticeably thinner. The moonlight in the eastern sky pierced through the clouds and cast beams of light grey on the world.

Fiona and Benedict were wearing winter gear—wool jackets and pants over their indoor clothes, with coats, hats, gloves, and boots ready for them to wear. Their wrists were now free, but ropes were tied around their waists, each held like a leash by Elvar and Kirk.

"How is the party hall?" Claire asked Elvar, turning away from the window. Elvar, who had an earpiece in one ear, answered.

"They're finished. The servants are asleep. They won't be getting up for a long time considering how much of the drugs we used. And they'll be finished setting up the fire in a few minutes."

"Excellent."

Claire glanced at her wristwatch. It was just past four in the morning.

When she lowered her left arm, she met Fiona's upward gaze.

Fiona seemed a little tired. Her left cheek was swollen from being struck. But she stared defiantly. Claire did not avert her gaze. Several seconds of silence followed.

Fiona slowly spoke.

"There's no guarantee you'll succeed."

But Claire ignored her and turned to Elvar and Kirk.

"Anyway." She said. "The Roxchean police are a pack of idiots. We would have bought these weapons anyway, but it was a gamble to buy so many."

Elvar did not say anything.

"Although I think they caught on to the film." Kirk noted. Benedict's curiosity was piqued.

"You even bought the film in secret? Why?"

Claire answered with surprising ease.

"Many large productions want to film Ikstova. If we bought the film publicly and they found out, we'd get every nameless production begging to join us."

"My goodness. How competitive." Benedict sighed, surprised.

"And they would have even followed us tonight. Nuisances." Claire spat.

"I would have liked that." Benedict chimed in. A meaningful smile rose to Claire's lips. Kirk spoke.

"Even if they noticed something amiss at the Capital District, it's too late. We're all going to 'die' here."

Claire nodded firmly.

"Yes. It's too late."

* * *

<Kunst air traffic control, do you copy?>

The air traffic controller had finished his cup of tea and was reading all alone in the room when a voice called to him from the radio.

Again, he reacted quickly. He turned off the nightstand, placed his book face-down on the desk, and pulled the microphone to his mouth as he pressed the call button.

<This is Kunst air traffic control. Reception adequate. What can I do for you?>

<We... can't give you our name, but this is a rented aeroplane.>

"Another strange one." The air traffic controller groaned, but he continued to do his job.

<All right, then. What do you need?>

<We're currently flying over the southern pass. We will reach the airport shortly. Requesting permission for landing.>

The air traffic controller opened the curtains by the desk. It was still snowing, but the moonlight clearly lit up the rows of tent hangars and the wind sock, billowing towards the west.

<Airspace and runway are clear. No crafts on standby for takeoff. Wind direction is east, about 3 meters. However, it's still snowing.>

<We'll make that. We see the airport. End communications.>

They cut off there without even a word of thanks.

"What's the rush, I wonder?"

The air traffic controller picked up the telephone and informed the other workers about the landing. Soon, he heard the roar of engines. Picking up a pair of binoculars, he peered out the main window at the runway.

Two lines of orange lights shone on the ice. An aeroplane made landing between them, scattering snow everywhere.

It was a mid-sized twin-engine aircraft with a sleek frame. The model was originally a bomber, but it was also sometimes used to carry passengers.

With a deafening noise the aeroplane slowly descended. It taxied quickly across the ice, pushed itself into a large, recently-cleared ramp, and came to a perfect stop in front of the hangar.

"A little violent, but that was excellent." The air traffic controller mused as people disembarked from the plane.

People dressed in grey began unloading large pieces of luggage from the back. Two of them walked over to the air traffic control center. One was a man, and the other—from the height and slight build—was a woman.

There was a knock. The air traffic controller opened the door.

A bespectacled man in his mid-thirties and a black-haired woman in her late twenties entered. They were both in grey coats and boots. Even after stepping into the warm room, they only removed their hats, not their coats.



"Welcome to Ikstova. How can I help you? If you need a car to Kunst, I can call someone to come get you. You might even make it in time for the celebrations." The air traffic controller said politely. Major Travas spoke.

"Thank you. I just wanted to check something here. Did you receive any reports of accidents or incidents in the Kunst area, including on royal property?"

"Pardon?" The air traffic controller's eyes widened. "No... nothing. The Kunst police force contacts us whenever something happens to make sure criminals on the run don't take off with an aeroplane. But we didn't get any word today. Are you from the Confederation's civil services?"

"Not quite, but thank you." Major Travas said. Axe bowed courteously as well.

But just as they prepared to leave—

"W-wait! Wait a second!" The air traffic controller said.

Travas and Axe turned.

"Was it your group that sent the strange message about an hour ago?"

Instead of saying 'no', Major Travas asked a question.

"What did the message say?"

"The royal villa is un-' is as far as I heard. But the signal suddenly cut off, and they wouldn't reply no matter how much I called back. I hope they haven't crashed or anything. Did you see any flames by any chance?"

Major Travas said that he didn't, his eyes narrowing.

Then he asked,

"Did you say, 'royal villa'?"

* * *

"Finally..."

Treize whispered, his voice scattering in a puff of white.

He was on the southern balcony on the third floor.

With the bedsheet poncho over him, he lay on his stomach on the coat he had taken off earlier, rifle at the ready. With a corner of the bedsheet wrapped over his head and hat, he peered out at the door through the railings.

He heard a voice from downstairs. It was a woman's voice.

"All right. Let's go."

Male voices responded to hers.

"Eight hostiles... and Mother and Father. That should be ten in total."

Treize looked down at the doors, where light spilled outside. People exited the villa.

They were all in coats, hats, and boots. First out were two men, guarded as they led the group. They were both armed with submachine guns.

Following after them were two figures, watched by the men behind them.

The two figures were also in coats and hats, but Treize instantly recognized them as his parents. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that they were tethered to the two men behind them.

"Hostages, huh..."

Then followed a slender figure—the woman.

"So the production company president was a woman, huh. The leader. ...That's seven. Just three more..."

Treize counted the people as they exited. The men who came out first left the beams of light from the doors and began walking east, their feet crunching over the snow in the murky moonlight. They were careful to stay in the middle of the road because there was a steep downward slope on the left side.

"Hurry."

The woman said, looking back.

"Right."

"Right."

Two more people left the villa and followed after the others.

"Eight... nine... huh?"

Treize froze mid-count.

The two people were pulling a sled. There were ropes tied around their waists, and behind them was a large sled about 2 meters long, supported perhaps by skis or a crate lid. Secured with rope to the top of the sled were two black sacks. Each was the size of a person.

"Are those bodies...?" Treize speculated, watching the sled depart.

According to the servant who came to the cottage, only one of the hostage-takers had died. Treize waited and waited. But no one else emerged after the sled. The two men with the sled also disappeared past the plaza and onto the road, leaving tracks in their wake.

Treize counted to himself again. Including the hostages, nine people were passing by. And two corpses.

"I guess another one ended up dead somehow... then it all adds up. Great!"

Treize stood. And without a sound, he tugged three times on the string that went through the slightly-ajar balcony door, the hallway, his bedroom door, and the closet.

"Please..."

That was the signal.

Shouldering his rifle, Treize moved over to the gutter from the edge of the balcony. He made almost no noise as he expertly made his way down and onto the ground at the doors.

Treize held his rifle in front of him and disarmed the safety.

And bending forward, he began to follow the fresh tracks in the snow. With muffled steps, like he was hunting foxes or rabbits.

The snow had stopped.

The clouds slowly passed by overhead.

The clouds were much thinner now, and even more moonlight was seeping through. A mosaic of black and white passed across the sky.

"It's so pretty..."

In the crawlspace, Lillia was examining Treize's pendant. She had it on her left hand, strung from her right.

The chain was gold, as well as the coin. On the coin was an intricate carving of a hawk.

Lillia was just about to put it back in her pocket when it happened.

"Ah!"

Treize tugged on the string three times. Lillia shifted suddenly, dropping the pendant onto the plywood floor.

"Oh no... that was close."

She quickly scooped it up into her hands and brought it to her pocket, but stopped.

"What if I lose it?"

Two seconds of thought later,

"This should be safer."

With a nod, she undid the clasp and put the pendant around her own neck before tucking it into her shirt.

She placed her left hand in a fist over her chest to check that the pendant was safely under her shirt.

"Yeah!"

And with a short yell, she stepped down into the closet.

With her hands on the plywood, Lillia slowly and quietly lowered herself into the closet.

The light was on in the room, and the curtains were closed. The door was open by about 20 centimeters to let the string pass through.

The moment Lillia made to step toward the door—

"?"

She spotted someone walking from the left to the right—that is, from the stairwell to the balcony.

It was only for a moment, but she recognized the figure of a man wearing a coat and carrying a rifle. A second later, Lillia heard the balcony door quietly open.

"Treize?" She whispered, and slowly crossed the room and opened the door. Then she peered out into the hallway in the direction of the balcony.

The man left the door open as he stepped outside. The moment Lillia stuck out her head, his feet disappeared behind the wall.

Lillia went to the balcony.

And she stuck out her head from the doorway.

"Ah!"

She gasped.

The figure was not Treize.

Elvar steadied a long, thin rifle from the edge of the balcony as he took aim at someone. The rifle belonged to Benedict.

In his sights was a figure in white, about 50 meters away and walking beside the road.

"Treize!"

When Lillia screamed, both Elvar and Treize reacted.

Though rattled by the girl's sudden appearance not 3 meters beside him, Elvar focused on his task. He turned straight back and peered into the scope.

Lining up the barrel under the lens with the figure in the distance, he immediately pulled the trigger.

Treize looked back at the soft scream in the distance.

He stood upright and turned, still holding his rifle.

He saw the villa. And a flash of light at the very edge of the third floor balcony.

And—

The bullet came faster than the gunshot.

There was a loud noise on the field of snow.

“Eek!” Lillia trembled, shrinking back.

And she saw the figure in the distance fall, blown away.

Snow fell over the figure in white. The pile of snow at the bottom of the slope simultaneously swallowed him and became a small avalanche, disappearing into the woods.

“Who?! Hey! I—”

Lillia’s third word was cut off.

Elvar had approached without a sound and landed a thrust to her solar plexus with the butt of the rifle.

He held the unconscious Lillia in his right arm and leaned the rifle against the railings.

“Wh-who is this? How—?”

Confused, Elvar laid Lillia down on the balcony. He scrutinized her face, completely still as though asleep, and mumbled to himself again.

“Who could this be?”

At that moment,

“Hm?”

Something seemed to glint near her neck. Elvar reached over with his right pointer finger, which stuck out through his glove.

The glint belonged to a golden chain. Elvar slowly tugged it. Soon, a golden coin emerged.

“I-impossible...”

His eyes widened in shock.

“Princess Meriel!”

<Leader, this is Elvar. Please respond.>

<This is Claire. I heard a gunshot in the distance. Was that you? Did you get her?>

<Y-yes. Someone did appear to chase after you. But it doesn't seem to have been the woman. I shot him with the rifle, square in the chest. I can't say for certain because he was carried down the northern slope in the snow.>

<Understood. Start the fire and come join us, Elvar. We're about to descend a slope. The rendezvous point will be 300 meters further. We'll meet at the lakeshore.>

<Yes, but... Leader. I have something to report.>

<What is it? Tell me.>

<It's a little difficult to explain over the radio... Could you return here with two or so men? Feel free to get rid of the fake corpse along with the sled.>

<What about the fake queen?>

<Have Palmer lead and take them to the aeroplane first. Please come back with Jake and Wayne, Leader.>

<Is this a change of plans? Has something serious happened?>

<Yes. That's correct.>

<Understood. I'll be there shortly. We'll contact you by radio just before we arrive.>

<Understood, Leader. I will be waiting. End communication.>

Chapter 8: Major Travas's Battle

"Unbelievable... this is Princess Meriel?"

"Look at her pendant, Leader."

"It's true... only a member of the royal family could have a pendant like this."

In the lobby, Elvar and Claire—the latter still in her coat—looked down from either side of Lillia, under a gravely wrong impression.

Lillia was in her coat, lying on another coat. Treize's pendant shone on her chest.

Next to the door, and in the second floor hallway, Jake and Wayne stood on guard with machine guns at the ready.

In a corner of the lobby was a wooden crate. Inside it was oil-soaked cloth, and rolled up next to it was a particularly long fuse. It was not yet lit.

The other fuse sticking out of the crate ran up the stairs to the second floor, into the party hall where the servants slept.

Claire was outraged.

"That sly fox! She hid Meriel right under our noses all this time! Not bad... not bad at all!"

"We didn't see her when we were searching the third floor earlier... I'm very sorry, Leader."

"Not to worry, Elvar. It's thanks to your contingency plan against the servant woman that we managed to get a hold of Meriel. It's a marvelous accomplishment! Don't you agree? Now we have the entire royal family in our custody!"

"Then will we be taking the princess?" Asked Elvar. When Claire replied, 'Of course', he seemed relieved. Claire did not miss that flash of emotion.

"Worry not. I don't intend to kill a girl this young. We're simply going to use her to threaten the queen."

"...Miss."

Elvar made a hesitant face. Claire gave him a gentle pat on the arm.

"It's 'Leader'."

"Apologies, Leader."

"All right. You carry the girl." Claire said, smiling.

"Understood. I injected her not long ago, so she shouldn't wake up for a while yet."

"Excellent. We can't have her making a fuss while we're transporting her. Princesses are often loud and self-centered." Claire said, amused. She then left to speak to Jake, who was standing guard.

"Thank you, Miss."

Elvar thanked Claire once she was gone, and squatted on the floor. He gingerly wrapped Lillia in the coat that was under her. Then he put a hat on her head and made sure to cover her ears to prevent frostbite. After that, he gently picked her up and carried her on his large back.

Finally, Elvar tied her arms and legs in front of him so she wouldn't slide off, and stood.

Casting a glance at Lillia's face beside his own, Elvar whispered under his breath.

"Children don't have to fight their parents' wars..."

Lillia said nothing.

"We're leaving! Start the fire!" Claire ordered. Wayne came down the stairs and lit the fuse with a match.

Slowly, little by little, the long fuse began to burn.

Jake and Wayne walked out the door.

"We finally say goodbye! May the royal family rot and turn to ash!"

With that, Claire left the villa, her coat swirling.

The fuse slowly burned in the silent villa.

* * *

The snow had stopped completely.

They could see the sky between the flowing clouds. The moon in the east was only about thirty percent the size of the full moon, but it gave off enough light to see.

Six people were walking across Lake Ras, which was frozen solid and covered in snow.

It was a wide, snowy plain. There was nothing in sight. It was like a flat, white desert.

North of the group were tiny clusters of lights, just above the horizon. It was the airport at Kunst. To the northeast was the city of Kunst. And to the east was the last of the peaks that dropped down to the plains of Roxche, standing in a large black mass.

Behind them, the lakeshore seemed to reach into the sky like a gigantic shadow.

The group was walking in a straight line. The man at the head of the group was pushing aside, collapsing, and patting down the waist-high snow underfoot as he walked.

"Could you please do a better job?"

Three meters behind him walked Benedict, patting down the snow even more firmly. Two meters behind him was the man holding the rope wrapped around his waist, carrying a submachine gun in the other hand.

Behind that man walked Fiona and the man holding her rope, about 5 meters behind the others on the relatively steady path.

The last of the men was also holding a submachine gun, walking with the occasional backwards glance. Tied to his waist was a length of rope connected to the sled carrying their dead friend.

The wind was calm, and the air quiet.

"Things would be much easier if we went by skis."

Benedict's grumbling sounded unusually loud in the stillness.

"Shut up." Said the man at the front. He was wearing a name card that read 'Mike'. He was the youngest of the hostage-takers, around the same age as Benedict.

Benedict was not cowed in the least.

"You, sir, in the front. If you are tired, why not switch with someone behind you?"

Mike snorted.

"Yeah... I almost want to trade jobs with you."

"That sounds very good. I am used to this work. But I will be changing our destination to the Kunst police department."

Burress, the fifty-something man holding Benedict's rope, muttered bitterly.

"Expected no less from a hero, joking around at a time like this. If we didn't need you to be walking, I'd give you a little taste of pain."

"Thank you for your restraint." Benedict said, and glanced backwards. "Fi, are you following us?"

"Yes." Her voice said. "I'm fine."

The one behind Fiona was Kirk, who had been standing behind her even in the interrogation room. He was silently keeping an eye on the queen.

Palmer, who was walking at the very back, said plainly to the hostages,

"You two."

He was the oldest of the group, well over the age of sixty from his looks.

"Once we get to the airport, we'll shut you up by force if necessary."

"That makes sense." Benedict said. "There would be a very big commotion if people found out you were holding the queen hostage."

"And a fake, too... Owen's not gonna rest in peace..." Palmer said bitterly.

"..."

Fiona continued to walk without saying a word. But Benedict chattered in her stead.

"Except for the young person at the front, are you all from the old Terreur Foundation, Mr. Palmer?"

"That's right, Hero of the Mural."

"I see. Of course."

"What do you want to know that for?" Asked Palmer. The other men turned their attention to Benedict curiously.

"If we are safely rescued and you escape, we will need information to go after you. I thought I should collect intelligence while I could."

"Ha!" Palmer barked. "We've got an optimist here, I see. No wonder you came out and announced the treasure like that."

"It was a wonderful treasure, don't you agree?"

"People lost jobs because of you."

"Like you. You are all older people because you were in the Roxchean military at the time, correct?"

Palmer nodded. The group pressed on, all ears on him.

"I took up the gun to protect my countrymen and kill you Westerners. But look at me now. You're standing right there, and I can't even shoot you."

"But now you will not be shot by Westerners, either."

"Hmph. Just say the word and I can cross the river and go wild. For my dead comrades."

"You must value your life more. You do not want to see your friends die again, do you?"

Palmer did not answer.

For a time, there was silence. Six people walked through the snow, their footsteps breaking the stillness. It was like a funeral march.

Eventually, Palmer spoke again.

"That's what war is."

It was only a moment later—

Thud. They heard someone fall onto the snow from the very back, near where Palmer's voice had come from.

"Hm?"

Kirk turned, not slowing his pace.

He saw a moonlit field of snow, and a narrow path. And no people.

"Hmm...?"

He looked down and found Palmer on the ground. Kirk quickly raised his voice.

"Mike! Halt!"

As three people stopped and watched, Kirk went up to Palmer. Fiona had to follow because she was still tethered to him.

"Hey. Palmer. Everything all right?" He asked. Palmer was crouched forward on the snow. "Get a hold of yourself. Did you wear yourself out?"

Kirk grabbed Palmer by the shoulder and slowly flipped him over, keeping his head raised.

"Hm?"

His thoughts came grinding to a halt.

Before his eyes was Palmer's face, unmoving and covered in dark red blood.

"Argh!"

Kirk reeled and fell onto the snow.

"Ah..."

Fiona behind him also glimpsed the bloodied corpse.

"What's going on?" Asked Mike, running over from the front. "Move!"

He passed by Benedict and Burrell, shoving Fiona aside and approaching the body.

"Mr. Kirk?"

"Palmer..."

"What?"

Mike, having fought the snow to reach Palmer, got down and examined his friend's face.

"..."

He was stunned into silence. Burrell asked him what was wrong.

"H-he's dead! Mr. Palmer's—"

But Mike could not finish responding. His voice cut off unnaturally and his body leaned backwards. Kirk and Fiona, who were right next to him, clearly saw the blood spouting in a red fountain from his forehead.

Mike fell to the snow, leaving a man-shaped hole in the plain.

"Hey, what's—"

"It's a sniper! Get down!" Kirk cried, cutting off Burress.

"Ugh!"

Burress and Kirk ducked simultaneously. The rope around Benedict was pulled taut.

"Whoa."

Benedict fell to the ground face-first. He tasted snow.

And—

"Huh?"

Fiona, who failed to react, was left standing alone on the lake. And she was completely ignored.

"Where'd that come from? I didn't hear any shots!"

"I don't know! Damn it!"

Burress and Kirk shouted from the ground.

"..."

Lost, Fiona scanned the lake.

"Huh?"

And she spotted a white figure.

Only 20 meters away stood a man in white. It was as though he had risen out of the ground. He was dressed from head to toe in white, with goggles over his eyes, a white mask over his face, and something resembling a sawed-off rifle in his hands.

He slowly raised his left hand and held up his pointer finger over his mouth. It was a universal gesture calling for silence.

As Fiona stared, still standing, the man slowly walked forward. With the rifle in hand he quickly crossed the snow.

"Shit! Run!" Burress cried, still crouching on the snow.

"Right! We'll drag the hostages if we have to—" Kirk said, looking up at Fiona beside him. With his right arm he reached up to pull her over, and a hole was blown through it.

"Gah!"

A bullet passed through his elbow, scattering blood in its wake.

There was no gunshot this time, either. Kirk cradled his arm as he curled up.

"What's wrong?" Asked Burress, crawling over.

"Damn it... got shot..."

Burress's face twisted in shock. When he looked up, he saw Fiona staring blankly at them.

"Damn you! You were hiding a gun?!"

He took aim with his submachine gun.

"Hands in the air!"

At that moment.

"Agh—"

Like a wind-up toy coming to a stop, Burress froze. The gun fell from his hands. And he fell face-first into the snow, never to move again.

As Kirk writhed in pain, Burress died with blood spilling from his head. His hat was stained a bright red and steam rose faintly from the blood.

Fiona realized that the man in white was standing behind her now. He was tall and well-built. All she could see of his face were the stern eyes under his goggles.

The man operated the bolt on his gun. A cartridge too small to be used in a rifle was expelled from it.

The gun was a modified bolt-action rifle, which used 45mm handgun rounds. It was an assassination-use gun with an integral suppressor. The man was opening fire in time with someone's voice.

"D-damn you..."

Kirk raised his head, swearing.

"Hm...? Argh!"

The man quickly ran over and swung the butt of the rifle at Kirk's temple.

"Gah!"

Kirk lost consciousness and fell into the snow. The man who hit him looked at Fiona and asked tersely in Roxchean,

"Are you hurt?"

Fiona shook her head.

"No. ...Hm?"

About 10 meters behind the man, Fiona saw another figure in white. And two more next to that. She looked around. There was another one behind her. They were all gliding on skis toward her.

Benedict raised his snow-covered head and sat up.

"Hm? What is this? Who are you?" He asked the white figure who stood next to his wife.

But the figure in white answered with another question.

"Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict?"

"Oh. That's correct."

"Yes. We are."

The man in white nodded satisfactorily.

And as though ignoring them, he walked over to the unconscious Kirk and dragged him by the feet for about 3 meters.

Benedict rose to his feet and shook off the snow, then went to Fiona's side. His eyes widened when he saw the five figures in white approaching them.

The five people stopped just 2 meters from Fiona and Benedict. They were all wearing white winter combat coats. Their hats and gloves were white, and around their waists were white belts and pieces of gear, white pouches, and holstered guns. They were even equipped with large, sheathed knives.

"Allies, you think?" Benedict asked Fiona in Bezelese.

"I hope so... but who?" Fiona replied, also in Bezelese.

Then, one of the five people responded to Fiona's question in Bezelese.

"It's a little embarrassing to say, but please call me the magician in white."

With that, the man pulled off his mask and hat.

"Ah!"

"Oho!"

When they saw the face underneath, Fiona and Benedict raised their voices in unison.

"It's been a while." Said Wilhelm Schultz, introducing himself. "Do you remember me? Major Travas of the Royal Army."

It took about a minute for Fiona and Benedict to finally calm down.



"We've been investigating Laurie Productions for some time."

Major Travas gave them a brief rundown of the situation. He explained that, when he found out about a revenge plot in Iks for something that occurred eighteen years ago, he supposed it might have something to do with Owen Nichto. That he had visited the airport earlier and heard that something might have happened at the villa, and that he and his team were on their way when they ran into the group.

"An emergency communication to the airport? Who could have done that?"

"I'm not sure... the servant?"

"The air traffic controller says it was a young man's voice."

"What?"

"Who could it be?"

Setting aside a mystery they could never solve at this point, Major Travas continued his explanation.

They had spotted the group walking from quite a distance, and had planned to ignore them—until they heard Benedict talking and realized that something was amiss.

"All that yammering wasn't a waste of time after all. We really owe you. Thank you." Benedict said in Bezelese. And he explained what had happened—and what was happening—to Major Travas. Because Axe was also with them, he neglected to mention Fiona's true identity and claimed that the royal family had no idea what the hostage-takers meant by a treasure.

In the meantime, the other four men had scattered. Equipped with a modified bolt-action rifle, a shotgun, an automatic rifle, and a rifle covered in white cloth that obscured its form, they surveyed the area.

"We were just going down the slope from the road when Nichto took two of her men and went back to the villa. I don't know why. She got a surprising message on the radio before she left, but I'm not sure what it was." Said Benedict.

"Then we'll ask one of her men."

On Major Travas's orders, the unconscious Kirk was dragged over. His arm was tightly bound to stop the bleeding and his wrists were tied together.

After a few slaps and some snow to the face, Kirk regained consciousness.

A modified rifle and Axe's revolver were aimed at Kirk, who sat on the snow. Major Travas spoke.

"Why did your leader return to the villa?"

A hint of a smile rose to Kirk's snow-covered face.

"I can't say."

Without missing a beat, Major Travas spoke again.

"Hm. So you don't know the contents of the transmission after all."

Kirk's smile faded.

"...What makes you think that?"

"Because I saw relief flooding your face the moment you heard my question. You must have thought that you could withstand any interrogation because you didn't know the answer to begin with. That you could at least buy time for your friends."

Kirk was silent. Major Travas ignored him and turned to Benedict and Fiona, speaking in Bezelese.

"He doesn't know a thing. We'll head to the villa."

"What will you do with him?" Fiona asked, making a point of speaking in Roxchean. The captured man flinched.

"He'll only get in the way if we take him..." Major Travas trailed off.

Fiona shook her head. And she looked Major Travas in the eye, her swollen face prominent.

"Arrest him. We'll punish him by Ikstovan law."

Slowly, Major Travas raised his right hand in a salute.

Fiona paused gravely and nodded.

Kirk, however, raised his voice.

"You're not taking me that easily!"

With his hands still bound, he drew a thin knife from his boot.

"This is for my friends!"

He leapt in the blink of an eye and charged at Fiona, who stood 3 meters away.

The man with the rifle quickly pulled the trigger. The bullet landed square in Kirk's side. But he did not slow.

Major Travas moved in front of Fiona. Axe quickly took aim at Kirk.

"..."

But she did not pull the trigger. She had a single second—enough time to shoot him—but the revolver never roared.

"Argh!"

Kirk passed by the line of fire and leapt toward Major Travas.

"Ugh!"

Major Travas reached out and grabbed Kirk's shoulder. But that only slowed him for a moment. Travas fell backwards, unable to stand the force. As Kirk fell forward, he headbutted Major Travas in the chest.

"Grk!"

And in the second Major Travas loosened his grip, Kirk used his weight to push the knife into his gut. The blade pierced Travas's white combat uniform and slowly drove itself into his skin.

"Die!" Kirk cried.

"I refuse!"

Major Travas landed a sucker punch on his nose.

"Gah!"

When Kirk reeled for a split second, Major Travas drew a 9mm automatic handgun. He pushed the muzzle into Kirk's gut, disarmed the safety, and pulled the trigger. Two muffled gunshots sounded between them.

"Urgh! Grk..."

Kirk's upper body was thrown backwards. Major Travas pushed him aside with his left hand. Blood gushed from Kirk's stomach as he lay on the floor, and stained his coat.

"Major!"

"Major!"

Axe and a male subordinate cried in unison.

"I'm all right..."

Major Travas rose, holding his left hand over his stomach. He winced painfully and moved his hand up to his chest. And he pointed the gun in his right hand at Kirk.

"Kill me!" Kirk spat, vomiting blood.

"Yes. I'll end your pain."

Major Travas pulled the trigger. One shot to the chest, and another. This time, the gunshots resounded into the air. Fiona flinched at each shot.

Two cartridges flew into the air and fell into the snow.

"Phew..."

With a sigh, Major Travas fell to his knees.

"Are you all right, Major?" Asked the male subordinate, looking at Travas's face. The latter replied, his face covered in sweat.

"It hurts a bit. Not so much the wound as my conscience."

"Should we have a look at the wound?"

"No, we can do that later. We should move."

The man nodded and looked up. Then.

"..."

He turned to the young woman standing in a daze, holding a revolver and staring in his direction.

"Axe! You could have gotten that shot! Why did you hesitate?!"

"I-I... I'm... sorry..."

Her voice shook. Her one visible eye trembled unsteadily.

"Never mind. You can put away the revolver, Axe." Major Travas said nonchalantly, slowly getting up. He was steady on his feet. "Hm. Yes. I'm fine." He added, smiling at the male subordinate.

"Axe has never shot a person before." He explained. "The first kill is tough for everyone."

"But that could have hindered—"

"This takes priority. Everyone, prepare to move."

"...Yes, sir." The man replied, and went over to convey the orders to the others.

"You all right, Major?" Benedict asked, coming up from behind. Major Travas turned.

"Yes. This is nothing."

"Thank you for protecting my wife."

Fiona expressed her gratitude as well.

"Thank you. Make sure to get that injury looked at. Promise us."

Major Travas nodded, smiling.

And,

"My apologies, Major..."

He turned to the subordinate who stood hanging her head beside him.

"Forget about it, Axe. We're moving out."

"Yes, sir."

Axe forwent the salute and walked off with a firm nod.

Wading through the snow, she headed to get her skis, and whispered under her breath.

"The first kill is tough for everyone... The first... first kill..."

And she exhaled angrily.

Her eyes burned with outrage, locked on the deserted snowscape.

"And yet! You killed my father without a second thought!"

No one heard the words out of Gratz Axentine's mouth.

Watching the group in white prepare to move, Benedict spoke with Major Travas.

"The villa, eh? I'm coming with you." He said, collecting the submachine guns and extra magazines from the bodies.

"I'd prefer it if you were to head straight to the airport... but I suppose I can't convince you otherwise." Major Travas said. Benedict grinned.

"Course I'm going. It's my house."

"I'm coming too." Fiona chimed in. "It's just Claire Nichto and three men left now. I'm going after them and having them arrested before they can leave the country."

"Great! Can we halt all bus service and flights out of the country?"

"Wait a moment, please. That might not be a good idea." Major Travas cut in.

"Why not?"

"Why?"

Fiona and Benedict asked. Major Travas explained himself.

First, he told them that the team's priority was Fiona, Benedict, and the villa's well-being.

Then he explained that, even if the remaining hostage-takers were to escape the country, their announcement of Fiona's deception would carry no weight without Fiona herself in their custody. That they could cause no harm for the moment.

"Even if they announce their discovery, it will obviously be taken as just another conspiracy theory like the snow monsters of Iks. They'll assume the recording is a detailed fake."

"True..."

"I suppose you're right. ...I'm about as believable as snow monsters to the public."

"Ah, my apologies. And also—"

Major Travas finally added that the identities of Claire Nichto and her team were clearly known, and that there was no hurry to go after them because the Confederation police would catch them eventually.

"I see... so our priority's to get to the villa without running into them." Said Benedict. Major Travas nodded.

"Was there regular communication from the villa?"

"No."

"Then we should keep this situation a secret until we receive word. We have an extra pair of skis, Benedict, if you'll do the honors."

Benedict chuckled and nodded.

"Right. I'll carry Fi on my back. There's a faster route to the villa than the one these people took. Looks like they had no idea you could go around the back. Let's go."

* * *

In the woods covered in moon-cast snow, the shadows of the branches shone in dark mosaics. It was still and silent.

Half-buried next to a tree was a person.

The tree was bent under the weight of snow on the steep 40-degree incline, its roots hanging down. And a person was caught sideways in the roots as though in their embrace.

More than half of his right side was buried, and there was a faint sprinkle of snow on his face. His uncovered left side and arms did not even twitch.

A clump of snow fell from the branches. It instantly covered the left side and arms of the person lying beside the tree.

There were no more human figures in the woods.

Silence filled the forest again. Three seconds passed.

"GAAAAH!"

The person sat upright with a loud cry. He quickly dusted the snow off his upper body and rolled from the roots and down the slope.

"AAAAHHH!"

Scattering snow everywhere, he rolled 10 meters downhill.

"Bwaughh!"

With an incomprehensible cry,

"Koff! Koff!"

The person spat snow out of his mouth and coughed several times.

"Hah! Ah! Hah!"

And he yelled three or so times.

He pulled off his hat. A head of drenched black hair emerged. He shook his head to get rid of the snow on his face. It was Treize.

"DAMN IT!" He roared. There was a vertical 3-centimeter cut on his forehead. Blood ran down the side of his nose and by his mouth.

Treize licked it off. He tasted the blood between ragged breaths.

"Take that, damn it..."

Glaring at the deserted snowscape, he raised a cry.

"I'm still alive!"

Treize began to climb up the slope.

The backpack and the makeshift poncho had disappeared somewhere when he rolled down the hill. He stripped off his coat because it was weighed down by clumps of snow. Wearing only woolen pants and a jacket, and without even a hat, he scrambled up the hill.

The snow gave away countless times and Treize was pushed back each time. He constantly looked for a decent tree to crawl to and use as a foundation to find the next.

He was covered in sweat. A bead of sweat even ran down his cheek.

It was below freezing outside. If his body cooled now, his sweat would freeze and kill him. So Treize did not stop for a moment as he worked up the hill. The blood from his cut stopped after he shut his eyes and wiped it off a few times.

For over twenty minutes he crawled, until he finally reached the point where he fell—the path in the snow. He had come back to the place where he had been shot.

He looked to the left, then the right. He saw no one. About 50 meters to the right he saw a building.

"..."

Shoulders heaving, Treize panted. And he slowly headed for the villa.

Crunch. He felt something hard underfoot.

Treize reached into the snow and grabbed it.

"Ah..."

It was the rifle he had brought. Near the very center, where the rounds were neatly loaded, was a large hole. He could see the rounds and the metallic parts through the split wooden cover.

"I get it. The bullet hit this thing."

He finally understood.

At the time, Treize had turned without thinking at Lillia's cry. At the same time, he saw a flash of light coming from the villa's balcony. Then he was seized by an impact near his head, and as his consciousness faded he heard a gunshot.

Then he spun violently like he was thrown into a shaker, tossed more roughly than in any aerobatic maneuver, and finally lost consciousness.

When Treize turned with the rifle still in front of his face, the bullet had hit the rifle and the butt of the rifle had struck him square on the forehead.

"You took the shot for me... thank you."

Picking up his gun, Treize resumed walking. He was struck by a chill as his sweat began to cool. He sneezed again and again. His head spun and the world seemed to twist and turn.

"Damn it!"

Treize broke into a run. He scattered snow in his wake as he sprinted down the path.

Several bouts of curses and expletives later, he was finally at the plaza. Once he was standing under the light, a sigh escaped his lips.

At that moment—

"Freeze! Lower your weapon!"

He heard a man's voice form next to him.

"What?"

Irritated, he turned. A man in white emerged from behind the corner. He was holding a shotgun at Treize. Another man came out after him, holding a modified rifle.

"..."

The broken rifle fell from Treize's hands.

"Hands in the air."

Another order. Drenched in sweat, Treize raised his hands into the air, took a deep breath, and—

"DAMN IT! WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!"

He shouted more loudly than he had ever that day. Then his head began to shake.

Thud.

And he fell in the middle of the plaza.

"Treize! Wake up! Hey! Get up! Treize!"

Someone was loudly calling his name. When Treize squinted, he saw the face of a bearded man.

He had no idea what was going on.

"Ten more minutes..."

"Get up, you dolt!"

"WHOA!"

When he realized that he was looking at his father, Treize sat up without warning. Benedict pulled away a second before Treize's head hit his chin.

They were in the party hall in the second floor. Treize was lying right beside the fireplace, which was stuffed with firewood and filling the room with warmth.

Treize had been stripped out of his wet clothes, left in just his underpants and layers of fluffy towels. When he touched his finger to his forehead, he felt ointment on his cut.

He turned. The servants were lying in a row on the other side of the room, covered in blankets. Watching over them were two or so people in white combat gear.

"You're finally awake." Said the man beside him. Treize looked at him properly.

"Oh. Father."

Then he surveyed his surroundings.

"What about Mother?"

"Your mother's fine. She's in the lobby right now. Water?"

Benedict held out a bottle of water. Treize snatched it without a word and gulped down its contents.

"What were you doing, anyway? Breaking my rifle, walking around in spring clothes and drenched in sweat, and shouting like a drunk at our front door?"

Treize finally took his mouth away from the bottle and wiped his mouth.

"Who cares? It doesn't really matter at this point."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

"It doesn't, okay? Never mind!"

"Is that any way to talk to your father? Give back that water!"

"It's mine now!"

"Where are your manners? Who taught you to behave?!"

"Go look in the mirror! And shave that beard, while you're at it!"

As Treize and his father's argument escalated,

"..."

Claire Nichto was looking down at her men's bodies.

They had followed the clear footprints in the snow and gone out into the lake when they found the four men in the moonlight. They had all been shot and were lying in piles of red snow. All four bodies were cold like meat in a freezer.

The bodies all had their hands folded over their chests. Someone must have done that to them. Next to the four men was Mores's body, still in the sack.

"..."

Through gritted teeth Claire seethed. She stood for some time in silence.

Jake and Wayne scanned the area with submachine guns at the ready.

Elvar, who was standing behind Claire, slowly lowered his rifle and the sleeping Lillia to the ground. There were signs that people had walked around the area. As he examined the footprints, Elvar found several cartridges. 45mm rounds and 9mm rounds.

He picked them up and scrutinized them.

"..."

Then Elvar clenched his fists. The sound of metal on metal punctuated the stillness.

"What in the world happened here...? What in the world?!" Laurie cried. Elvar went up to show her the cartridges.

"They must have been attacked. And not by normal people, like the Kunst police force. Look at these, Leader."

Elvar deposited the empty cartridges onto Claire's open hand.

"We didn't use rounds this size. And look at the bottom of the cartridges. There's nothing there. No manufacturer initials, no size indicators, nothing. Civilians and police couldn't get their hands on equipment like this."

"Then who?" Claire demanded, throwing aside the empty cartridges. Elvar shook his head.

"I'm not sure, Leader. But they're clearly a formidable and experienced group. No run-of-the-mill team could have taken out Palmer and the other before they could resist."

"Damn it..." Claire swore, gritting her teeth. A second later—

"Leader! I see ski tracks! There are six... Seven of them."

Jake called out to them, having gone to scout the direction of the airport. Elvar acknowledged his discovery and asked,

"Are they headed to the airport, then?"

"Well... it's strange, but they've switched directions slightly and are pointing back to the villa."

Elvar thought for a moment before speaking.

"They must have rescued Benedict and the queen and gone back to the villa."

"Damn it!"

Claire pulled out her revolver. And she went up to Lillia, whom Elvar had laid down in the snow.

"Stop this, Leader. She's a valuable hostage."

Claire shot Elvar a glare.

"Her leg! One little hole in her leg!"

"She could still die of blood loss."

"But those bastards! Those bastards came out of nowhere and killed my men! Four of my men!"

"Yes. They did. And we will make sure to pay them back. Which is why our hostage is all the more valuable. You must be calm, Leader. In war, you must never lose your cool."

"...Damn it! Yes! Yes, you're right! But what do we do now? We've lost the queen!"

"We still have the princess. We still have a way."

"Then tell me!"

"Of course. When the queen and her rescuers left this place, they surely must have decided to let us escape Iks rather than chase us down."

"But why?"

"If they wanted to capture us, they would have been lying in wait somewhere on the path here. They could have easily killed us, considering how our men died without putting up any resistance. But they didn't. Because they determined that they would lose nothing by letting us escape."

"They think we're fools. But we have the queen's voice on tape, confessing to her deception."

"They must be planning to hide the fact of our attack and claim that the tape was fabricated. Then they would use the Confederation police force to arrest us."

Claire finally understood the scope of Elvar's explanation. She was apoplectic.

"That vixen! Clever in all the worst ways!"

Elvar remained calm, however, as he continued to advise her.

"But the queen doesn't realize that we have Princess Meriel in our custody. We can still negotiate."

Claire turned to the girl lying in the snow. She grinned belligerently.

"Excellent. Then... this war is not over yet."

Elvar nodded.

* * *

The villa lobby.

Major Travas's men had taken apart the incendiary mechanism and were transporting the parts out the door.

"I'm so sorry. I have no idea what Treize could be doing here."

"It's quite all right. We'll ask him once he's awake."

Fiona was speaking with Major Travas. Axe and the other subordinates were standing guard outside the front doors and behind the building.

"You should also get some rest, Fi." Major Travas had just said, when a voice spoke from below.

<Do you hear me, Queen?>

It was Claire's voice.

Fiona and Major Travas slowly looked down. They knew what was there. They had collected the radios from the dead men, and because the headsets were unplugged the voice was coming from the tiny radio speakers.

Fiona slowly sat on the floor and picked up the radio, which looked like a large telephone receiver.

<You are listening, aren't you?>

Claire's voice again. Major Travas pointed Fiona to the call button.

Fiona pressed firmly on the button and spoke with her mouth by the microphone.

<Yes, I can hear you. Do you have any more business with me?>

She took her finger off the switch.

Several seconds passed in silence.

<I'm glad to hear you're well, Queen. Are you at the villa now? Nice and toasty inside?>

<Yes, and no. I'm in the villa, but not by the fire. It's quite chilly here in the lobby. But we've dismantled the dangerous device you left here.>

<Oh? So much for our token of kindness.>

<Benedict and I are safe now. There are watchful eyes on us.>

Yet more time passed silently.

<Did those people... kill my men?>

<Yes.>

Fiona said, and waited for Claire to respond. But there was silence yet again. So she pressed the call button.

<You'll be leaving Ikstova now, correct?>

This time, she got an answer.

<No. Not yet. We can't just leave you behind.>

Benedict hurried down the stairs, having heard the voice from the radio. Claire continued.

<You will come to us alone, Queen.>

<And if I refuse?>

<Confident as ever. Have you figured it out yet? If you refuse to comply, you forfeit the hostage's life.>

"Hostage?" Fiona whispered. Benedict came up to her then, so she asked him how many servants were present. He replied immediately.

"Everyone's here, then."

Fiona returned to her conversation with Claire.

<Who exactly do you have with you?>

<Let me be gracious and answer that obvious question. Your daughter. I have Princess Meriel.>

The three people listening to Claire's voice were left utterly baffled.

"What?"

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

Fiona exchanged glances with Major Travas and Benedict, all shaking their heads, and asked the question on all their minds.

<Wh-what are you talking about?>

<Your complacency never ceases to amuse me. I captured your daughter when I returned to the villa. And now she sleeps beside the bodies of my men. If you don't want her sleep to be just as eternal, you'll do as I say.>

"..."

Fiona paused, not knowing what to say.

<Think carefully, Queen. I'll contact you again once you've gotten a hold of yourself.>

Claire cut off the conversation there. Fiona tried to call her back several times, to no reply.

Fiona handed the heavy radio to Benedict and frowned.

"Meriel? But she should be in Sou Be-Il right now. In Sfrestus. What's happening here?"

Benedict tapped his temple and replied.

"What is going on? Did the lady hit her head, you think?"

A moment later.

"No!"

Someone yelled from the top of the staircase.

Three sets of eyes flew upwards. Standing on the landing was Treize, a sorry sight in just his underpants. He looked like he had just stepped out of a sauna.

Rushing down to the lobby, he yelled as loudly as he could.

"Lillia! She's talking about Lillia!"

Chapter 9: Treize's Battle

Treize told his parents and Major Travas everything.

That he heard about what happened at the villa from the servant who managed to escape. That he came to the villa through the tunnel, alongside Lillia. That they caused a diversion with the bomb. And that he ended up sneaking to the third floor with Lillia.

One of Major Travas's subordinates went up to Treize's room to get some clothes for him. Treize was soon given a shirt and a pair of pants similar to what he had been wearing earlier. He quickly pulled them over his underpants and continued to explain.

How he had been interrupted while contacting the airport. How he had tried to tail the hostage-takers, only to be caught in an obvious trap and sniped from the villa.

And how Lillia had likely been captured by the man who shot him, and that Lillia was probably the reason Claire and two of her men returned.

And finally, he explained that the hostage-takers must have confused Lillia for Meriel because he had given her his pendant.

"I see. So that's how it is."

Benedict nodded.

"..."

Major Travas said nothing.

"My goodness..."

Fiona shook her head again and again.

She stood face-to-face with her son, who stood at about her own height, and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Treize. What you did was unacceptable. It wasn't right. What if you'd been caught and killed? And how could you let Lillia get involved? Why did you give her your pendant?"

Treize did not respond. His arms hung limp at his sides as he sadly averted his gaze.

"But if His Highness hadn't done anything," said Major Travas, "this villa would be in flames by now. And the servants would be dead. The hostage-takers would have managed to escape to the airport and left with the queen and her husband, while my team floundered."

Major Travas remained calm and professional, even though his own daughter had been taken hostage.

"True, that. Good going, Treize. And Lillia, too, if she were here to hear me." Benedict said. But Fiona cast them both a disapproving look.

"Now even the children are involved in their parents' war."

"Now it is their war to fight." Major Travas said.

Treize looked up. He looked the queen straight in the eye.

"I'm fighting for my country, Your Majesty."

"..."

"And you're safe now, Mother."

With a soft sigh, Fiona lowered her hands to Treize's back. And she pulled him into an embrace.

Only Treize could hear the words she whispered into his ear. He returned the embrace, wrapping his arms around his mother.

"He looks just like his mother." Major Travas remarked. Fiona and Treize were about the same height and had similar hair; when they were embracing, their clothes were about the only way to tell them apart.

"Like twins, eh?" Benedict chuckled. "But you know, if we tell Claire Nichto that they don't actually have the princess, do you think she's just going to give in?"

Major Travas shook his head.

"Not likely."

"Right. Sorry you had to get involved, too."

"In this case, the best option is to keep Claire Nichto in the dark. Let them assume Lillia is the princess. Princess Meriel's face is not known to the public; no matter how much Lillia claims otherwise, as long as we pretend she is the princess, she will retain value to them as a hostage."

Benedict sighed, awed and astonished at Major Travas's utter calm.

"You're one hell of a guy, you know that?"

"The more anxious you are, the less you must be, I was taught."

"From the Aikashia school?"

Major Travas nodded.

"You really ought to come stay in Ikstova for good. In case something like this happens again." Said Benedict.

"I'll think about it." Major Travas replied.

Benedict scratched his head and returned to the matter at hand.

"They want the queen to come alone, right?"

"Yes. They'll likely demand an exchange—the queen for 'Princess Meriel'—and call the queen out to Lake Ras, where there is nothing to obstruct their vision, and take both women with them. They'll threaten via radio to kill one of them should we pursue them."

Benedict grunted.

<How does it feel, Queen?> Claire taunted from the radio.

Fiona kissed Treize on the cheek and let him go. Benedict picked up the radio and handed it to Fiona with a reminder.

"Lillia is Meriel."

Fiona nodded and took the radio.

And she immediately answered.

<Not very good. Where are you?>

<What is that to you?>

<I'd like to come pick up the hostage.>

<So you finally listen to reason. The princess still sleeps by the bodies of my friends. she's been sleeping so long I've been wondering what to do with her. Is she always this way?>

<I'm afraid so. Give her a warm cup of tea when she wakes up. With lots of honey. Otherwise she'll be cranky.>

<Hahahaha! I'll keep that in mind, Queen. Shall we cut to the chase, then?>

<Of course.> Fiona replied.

<Our demands are the same. We do not need the princess. We simply want the woman who deceived the world. You, Fiona.>

<Fine. What shall I do, then?>

<I'm waiting beside my sleeping friends. You will come here alone.>

<The same place as before, then? And on my own?>

<That's right. It won't even take an hour by ski. It's almost daybreak. You will come to us by sunrise. With no one else. If we see anyone around you, we will open fire. The hostage won't be safe, either.>

Benedict advised Fiona to wait without answering for the moment, and asked Major Travas what they should do. Major Travas narrowed his eyes and fell into thought.

<All right. I'll be there alone before sunrise.> Fiona said suddenly.

Benedict was taken aback; Major Travas, shocked. Treize watched in silence.

<You will keep your word. We're waiting, 'Queen'.>

With that, Claire cut off communications.

"Fi! What are you—" Benedict started, but Fiona cut him off and turned to Travas.

"I heard you explain things earlier. But we can't rescue Lillia unless I go. Isn't that right?"

"Perhaps." Major Travas nodded.

"I'll go and explain to them. I'll tell them that Lillia has nothing to do with this."

"If I were in their shoes, then I would kill the unrelated party to silence her."

"I won't let that happen. Even if we're both taken hostage, we should find a way for both of us to come out alive."

For a moment, Major Travas said nothing. Several seconds passed in silence. Soon, he opened his mouth again, as calm as ever.

"If we want to resolve this situation, the fewer hostages there are, the better."

"How could you be so heartless, Wilhelm Schultz?! That girl is your daughter!" Fiona cried, glaring. Major Travas gave a wry chuckle.

"If Allison had heard what I just said, she would have beaten me to a pulp. I'm glad she hasn't."

No one laughed.

"Look, if we play by the rules of hostage negotiation—and that's an *if*—" Benedict emphasized, "we can't comply with their demands. Playing by the book, we have to gather skilled soldiers and kill the terrorists before they can relocate to a safer place."

"Is that possible?" Asked Fiona. Benedict shook his head. Major Travas agreed.

"The lake is too open for a sneak attack. Unless we crawl all the way from the shore, they'll spot our men from hundreds of meters away and open fire."

"Then there's no alternative. If I'm the only one who can make the approach, I'll do it. That's the only solution we have." Fiona declared.

The two men could not argue. Benedict groaned disapprovingly, and a dark look crossed Major Travas's face.

But Treize, who had been silent all along, raised his voice.

"Yeah! That's it!"

Fiona turned. Benedict and Major Travas also looked at him.

"What's with the outburst? Did you think of something?" Asked Benedict.

"You bet!" Treize replied immediately. "We just have to do exactly what the woman said at the end!"

"Hm?" Fiona tilted her head.

"What are you talking about?" Benedict asked, astonished.

Major Travas, who alone understood what Treize was trying to say, decided to confirm his determination.

"It's a very dangerous idea you're proposing. Do you understand that, Your Highness?"

Treize nodded, staring back at the bespectacled man.

"This is my war."

* * *

"...Hm? Hwaa..."

When Lillia opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the moonlight and the brightening sky.

A faded indigo sky filled her vision, without a single cloud in sight.

She saw no stars. There was no wind.

"Oh... must've fallen asleep." She mumbled, her eyes half-open.

"So you're finally awake." Said a female voice from her left. Lillia sat up at once.

She was in an empty field of snow. The pale blue desert of Lake Ras.

Lillia looked to her left. There stood a smiling woman wearing a coat.

"Er... who are you?" Asked Lillia. Claire replied mockingly,

"One of your mother's long-suffering victims."

"..."

Claire proudly leered down at Lillia.

"Oh. I see. ...I get it. Makes sense." Lillia replied, still not fully awake.

"Hm? Glad to see you agree." Claire smirked. Lillia looked apologetic.

"So the blond ghost claims another victim."

Claire frowned.

"What do you mean?"



About three minutes later.

"Are you awake now? Do you really understand who we are?"

Lillia was sitting on some extra coats on the snow, which had been trampled to firmness. Around her, snow was piled up to her head-level—waist-level if she stood. She simply sat there in the hole in the snow.

Claire sat across from Lillia, scrutinizing her face.

"Er... you're the ones who attacked the villa, right?"

"Correct." Claire smiled.

"A pretty lady like you?"

"What do you mean by that? I'm the one asking questions here."

"Huh...? Hmm... Wait... Oh! Ohhhhh!" Lillia gesticulated, her head finally back to working state. "Y-y-you captured me!"

Claire nodded briefly, her eyes locked on Lillia.

"I'm afraid we don't have any tea or honey for you, but try not to make a fuss."

Confused, Lillia propped herself up and looked around.

At first glance, there was no one on the lake. But upon closer examination she spotted men surrounding her in a triangular formation. They had dug trenches in the snow to conceal themselves.

Lillia pointed at one of the men in particular—who was holding a rifle with a scope—and raised her voice.

"I-it's you!"

Elvar turned when he heard the commotion.

"Yes. He's the one who captured you."

But Lillia half-ignored Claire, crunching through the snow to reach Elvar.

"Wh-what happened?! What happened to the person you shot from the balcony?"

"..."

Elvar remained seated, silently looking up at Lillia. Claire was bewildered.

"D-do you even understand your position?"

Lillia ignored her again.

"Answer me! What happened to him?!"

"Just answer her so she'll quiet down." Claire sighed. Elvar finally broke his silence.

"I shot the person who was going after my allies."

"And? And then?"

"He rolled down the slope when I shot him. That was all I could see. I didn't check if he was dead, or if he was injured." Elvar said.

"My, how kind of you." Claire said with a shrug.

For the moment, Lillia breathed a sigh of relief.

"I see... Thank you."

Elvar again turned his gaze to the south, keeping watch on their surroundings. The lake was becoming bluer and brighter now. His gaze was fixed on the south side, where he could see gently-sloping land covered with trees.

"There's still some time left. Come over here." Said Claire.

Lillia did as she was told without making a fuss. That was when she spotted men lying in the snow. Four in total.

"Huh...?"

At first, she assumed that they were asleep. So she looked at them.

"Ack!"

Blood had frozen solid on their faces. There were gaping holes in their heads. Lillia fell on her backside, terrified.

"Th-they're... they're dead..."

"Yes. They are." Claire said, walking over to her. "These men were my friends, who left first with the queen in their custody. They were attacked by a mysterious group and none made it back alive."

"..."

Lillia silently looked up at Claire.

Claire looked from the bodies of her men to Lillia and added,

"This is war, little lady."

"..."

Lillia slowly stood and took several steps toward the feet of the bodies. Then she clasped her gloved hands over her chest and slowly closed her eyes. It was her second moment of silence that year.

The men watched her without a word. Elvar, Jake, and Wayne all watched the girl praying for their friends.

"What are you doing?" Claire spat, displeased.

Lillia opened her eyes and lowered her hands. Then she turned to Claire.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Praying for them."

"They're my men. They don't need your prayers." Claire said uncomfortably. Lillia shook her head.

"Mom once told me that we should show respect to anyone who's died in battle, even if they were our enemies."

"..."

"Dead people aren't enemies anymore."

"..."

For some time, Claire stared coldly at Lillia. And finally, she managed to say,

"Sit down."

Lillia complied, sitting in the same place as earlier. Claire also took a seat across from her again.

"Listen up. While you were sleeping, I successfully called the queen to this place."

Lillia blinked, astonished.

"Wait, what? What does that mean?"

"The queen will soon be here to save you."

"Wh-why?"

"She must care for you that much." Claire said sarcastically. But Lillia was simply confused.

"The queen? Care for me? Why?"

"...Ask her yourself. You'll see each other soon enough."

"W-wow... er... What? What do I do?!"

Lillia was confused and lost. She could not calm down.

"Hysterical, aren't we?"

"Well, *anyone* would be panicking if they heard they were going to meet a queen! I've never met someone that important in my life!"

"..."

Claire frowned. Something had been wrong in their conversation so far. The men also listened carefully to their exchange, though their eyes were still scanning the lake.

"What are you talking about? Did you hit your head? The queen is your mother." Claire said. Lillie gaped. Then she tilted her head.

"What are *you* talking about? My mom's a normal person. A run-of-the-mill commoner."

Claire froze. Lillia continued.

"You know, the kind of person who skips back home after getting a discount at the butcher shop a minute before it closes for the day."

"Wait. Wait!" Claire said. And she gave Lillia an order. "Tell me your name."

Lillia did not miss a beat.

"Lillia."

"What?"

"Or did you want my official name?"

"Oh. Yes. Tell me your official name."

"Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz."

"..."

A cold breeze blew over the field of snow.

Morning came.

Though the sun had not yet rise, the world was full of light. The snowy lake shone brilliantly, reflecting the glow.

Claire was wearing a pair of lightly-tinted sunglasses, and the men black goggles.

Lillia had her hood pressed over her head as a temporary measure. But once the sun rose, she could easily be blinded by the brightness of the high-altitude snows.

Claire, still sitting across from her, continued to ask questions.

"So you really aren't Princess Meriel?"

Lillia was growing sick of the interrogation.

"How many times do I have to tell you? I'm Lillianne Aikashi-"

"Never mind. What a ridiculous name!" Claire said condescendingly.

"Hey! Don't make fun of people's names!" Lillia snapped back.

"If you're going to lie to me, try something more plausible! I'm surprised you managed to memorize something that long in the first place!"

"I told you, I'm not lying! I had it down perfectly by the time I was three!"

They were both in a full-on argument now, but Claire did not reach for her revolver, and the men did not interfere. Elvar even smiled at times as he listened to Claire growing flustered at Lillia's replies.

"Why in the world did you think I was the princess?"

"We still think you are. Your pendant is the key."

"Pendant?"

Lillia thought over the word for a moment, then remembered. She reached into her shirt and produced the pendant Treize had given her.

"This thing?"

"Yes. Only a member of the royal family could possess a pendant like this. Where did you get your hands on it?" Claire said threateningly.

Lillia didn't even need to blink.

"Royal family? As if. I borrowed this from a friend."

"What?"

"My friend is from Iks. Apparently this pendant's really important and I shouldn't lose it."

"...Would this friend of yours be a girl around your age?"

"A *boy* around my age."

"..."

Claire was rendered silent. Then,

"I'm getting a headache." She mumbled.

"Do you know where that boy got his hands on the pendant?" Elvar asked from his position. Lillia turned to him and replied plainly.

"No."

Then she added,

"But when I told him I wanted a pendant like this one, he promised me he'd get me one. I'm not sure, but aren't Iks's goldsmiths really famous? Maybe they sell these everywhere?"

"Ludicrous!" Claire burst out. Elvar tried to calm her.

"Leader. We can't completely rule out the possibility that someone created a detailed fake."

"You mean to say that the royal family and the police would overlook such a thing?!"

"Potentially, yes."

"Damn you! What a ridiculous country!"

"Leader, I have something to say." Wayne said suddenly.

Claire asked him to speak.

"I just recalled, but I've seen Princess Meriel's crest on the newspaper before. It was a flower. I'm not sure exactly what kind, but it was definitely a flower."

Claire grabbed Lillia by the collar.

"Ah!"

"Let me see that!"

With her right hand she grabbed the pendant and scrutinized it front-to-back. Carved on the coin was Treize's crest, the hawk. Claire was beside herself.

"It's a bird! There's no flower on this pendant!"

"My word... so she was telling the truth after all." Elvar said, despondent.

"Damn it!"

Claire let go of Lillia and the pendant, swearing yet again. And she fell to her knees in the snow.

"But the queen accepted our demands nonetheless. She agreed to come to us." Jake noted. Elvar agreed.

"Yes, Leader. We don't know what the queen is plotting, but things are going according to plan for us, if nothing else."

"Yes. Yes. You're right. Once the queen arrives, I will strike this girl in the face and demonstrate my fury!"

"Exactly." Said Wayne. Lillia tentatively spoke up.

"Er... can I ask you something?"

"What, commoner girl?"

"I'm not the princess, so can I go home now?"

"No." Claire replied immediately.

"Man... why are you people doing this? Do you hate the royal family that much?"

"None of your business."

"Why? You're from Iks, too." Lillia mumbled.

Stunned, Claire looked Lillia in the eye.

"H-how did you know I was from Ikstova? I never mentioned that."

"Well, because you call this place 'Ikstova'. Not many people in the Capital District know this country's official name. Everyone just calls it 'Iks' or 'the Kingdom of Iks'."

Claire raised an eyebrow, impressed.

"So you weren't just an imbecile after all."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment or an insult? For your information, my dad was so smart that he finished university in two years."

Claire smiled at the word 'dad'. She asked Elvar and the others if anyone was approaching yet, and was told that the lake was empty.

"Thirty minutes to dawn." Elvar added.

"Your name was Lillia, you said. I can't tell you the details, but I'll answer your question. My father was murdered by the queen."

"Huh? What?"

"He was killed because of her selfish actions. I am planning to avenge him. Do you understand now? How would you feel if someone murdered your father?"

"...I don't know. He's already gone. Before I even knew my own name." Lillia replied.

"I see... then you wouldn't understand. Pretend I didn't ask, then."

"All right."

Jake went up to Elvar, asking, "What has gotten into Miss Claire?". Elvar replied that he did not know.

Lillia looked at Claire.

"What will you do once the queen gets here? You're not—"

"No, we won't kill her. We're taking her prisoner. We still have unfinished business."

"That's a relief to hear. But can't you solve this peacefully? With words?"

"Probably not." Claire said firmly.

"Why not?" Asked Lillia.

A light smile rose to Claire's face.

"Because we've already killed too many of each other's loved ones for that."

"..."

"This is war. It doesn't end until one side acknowledges defeat or perishes completely. And I have no intention of admitting defeat."

"That's all fine and good *now*, but that might get you killed." Lillia said, concerned. But Claire did not respond.

"Don't worry." Elvar said. Lillia turned. Elvar continued, his back still turned to her.

"I won't let you die, Miss."

"How many times do I have to remind you today? Call me 'Leader'." Claire said cheerfully. Elvar apologized, and continued.

"We are about to do something quite underhanded—taking a girl hostage to capture the queen. All for victory. This is how war is fought. Your name was Lillia, correct? Remember this well."

"What happens if you lose?" Lillia asked, looking at Elvar, and then to Claire. "What happens if you lose and die?"

"Then it's over." Claire said, sounding almost amused.

"But... if you die, you'll never get to hear the radio again! They're starting that new season of the drama soon!"

"Oh... I've heard about that."

"Exactly! You can't just die without listening to it!"

"It doesn't matter. If all goes well, I'll be able to listen to it with the queen in the Capital District." Claire said, slowly rising to look at the bright eastern sky. Then she pulled back her sleeve to check her watch.

"It's almost dawn. Do you see her?"

Jake and Wayne replied that they did not.

Then,

"She's coming into sight, Leader." Said Elvar, peering through the scope with his rifle at the ready. "Almost due south. She's alone. All I see is her head at this point, but she's coming to us. She's on skis, so she'll be here soon."

"Excellent!" Claire clapped her hands together. "Yes! Capture the queen!"

"Understood!" Replied the men, putting a smile on Claire's face.

Then, she cast a sharp glance down at Lillia.

"Lillia, your name was? Stand. I want to tell you something."

"Wh-what is it?"

Lillia hesitantly rose to her feet. Claire smiled. Her obscured eyes curved behind her sunglasses.

"Your mother is a good person. Thank you for praying for my men."

"What?"

Out of nowhere, Claire shoved Lillia.

Lillia fell back-first on the snow.

"Man, that's cold..."

"I'm sorry. It's dangerous, so stay where you are for now. Once this battle ends and we have a chance to catch our breath, I'll treat you to warm tea and honey!"

"I don't really like honey..."

Naturally, Lillia's mumble went completely ignored.

Claire picked up the radio from atop the firm snow and spoke into it.

<Queen! Do you see me?>

* * *

<Yes, I see you. You're a little far, but I can make you out. I have good eyesight because I grew up in the mountains.> Fiona's voice said from Claire's radio.

"Excellent."

Claire stood up on the firmly-trodden snow.

In the trench ahead, Elvar held a rifle at the same level as the top of the snow. Jake and Wayne, armed with submachine guns, slowly crawled forward at about 30 meters to either side of Elvar.

"Tell the queen to continue this way, then stop and raise her hands when she's about 100 meters from us. Jake and Wayne will approach from either side and secure the queen, and I will cover us. Keep giving us orders, Leader, and please keep an eye on our flank and rear, just in case." Said Elvar.

"Understood." Claire nodded. And she added, "I have complete faith in your plans, Elvar."

A black dot appeared on the glowing lake. Slowly but surely, it grew larger and larger in the distance.

<Continue this way, Queen.> Said Claire. she received a reply several seconds later.

<Can you prove to me that the hostage is safe?>

<Come and see for yourself.>

Several more seconds passed before Fiona's answer.

<Fine. I'd like to give you a slap, too.>

"Hah!" Claire snorted.

Elvar peered through the scope as he reported in.

"I can see her quite clearly now. She's wearing a black coat and a hat. And goggles as well."

"Give it here."

"Don't shoot her, Leader."

"I know."

Claire received the rifle and peered into the scope.

Just before dawn, the snowy lake shone so brightly that it seemed to be glowing.

Through the scope, she could see a person approaching, wearing skis. A pair of ski poles moved busily on her either side.

She was wearing a navy, knee-length women's coat. On her head was a winter hat with ear flaps, and a pair of slightly tinted goggles were over her eyes. Each time she exhaled, a puff of air escaped her mouth. Claire spotted the red swelling on her left cheek and smiled.

Claire gave Elvar back the rifle and spoke into the radio.

<Tired yet? You're almost here.>

About five seconds later.

<...I'm doing my best... please don't talk to me...> Fiona panted, gasping for breath.

Jake and Wayne looked up at points as they continued to crawl through the snow, checking one another's locations and the queen's.

What once looked like a dot to the naked eye eventually took on human form. Eventually, they could see the color of her coat and her arms and legs moving busily.

<Can you see the anger in my face, Queen?> Asked Claire.

She received no answer.

<Fine. Come to a stop once you're 100 meters from where we are. We'll instruct you again if you're not certain.>

This time, she received an answer several seconds later.

<I understand... but I don't see the hostage...?>

<She's lying in the snow. She's dying to meet you.>

There were now only 200 meters between Claire and the queen. Jake and Wayne had covered about 50 meters from their starting points as well.

"Enough! Stop there!" Elvar ordered the men. They complied, raising their hands to indicate that they heard him.

"Er..." Lillia said tentatively, still lying in the snow, "my back is freezing. Can I stand now?"

Claire grinned.

"No."

There were 150 meters between the queen and Claire.

<That's enough. Stop right there.> Claire ordered through the radio.

There was no answer, but the queen stopped. Her shoulders heaved several times as she tried to catch her breath.

Then, she crouched on the snow and began to take off her skis. Two minutes of struggling later, the queen finally managed to get them off and stood on the snow. Her feet sank, instantly lowering her.

"Now!" Elvar commanded.

Jake and Wayne stood. Holding their submachine guns at just below shoulder-height, pointed at the figure standing as still as a statue before them, they slowly approached.

As Claire silently watched the scene, Fiona's voice came over the radio.

<Claire... I have one last request. Will you listen?>

<What is it?>

<Won't you surrender? Tell your men to put down their weapons. Let the hostage go and turn yourself in. I promise you that you will not be harmed, and that you will receive a fair trial. I don't care if you tell the world that I'm a fake.>

Quietly and quickly, Claire replied.

<I refuse.>

There were about twenty seconds of silence.

Fiona's voice finally returned to the radio.

<I see. I'm sorry to hear that. ...You may begin.>

Claire did not understand.

At that moment, the queen disappeared.

"Huh?"

To Claire,

"Hm?"

"What?"

And to Jake and Wayne, the queen really seemed to have vanished.

Like a magic trick involving a massive device, the queen had disappeared in an instant.

"Urgh!"

Elvar alone, looking through the scope, saw through the trick. He saw the queen quickly cast away her navy coat.

Before the coat fell to the snow, the queen got down in the snow and disappeared from sight.

Jake turned to Wayne, on his right.

"Wh-what's this? The queen's gone!"

Wayne replied with a confused look of his own. A moment later, his face—and the head connected to it—was partly blown away.

Jake's goggles reflected a man falling backward, chunks of red falling from his head. Scattering brain and blood everywhere, the body was buried in the snow.

A long gunshot echoed like a wave across the lake.

"That's one." Treize muttered under his breath.

He was dressed from head to toe in white.

Everything on his body was white. He had borrowed a winter-use camouflage combat suit from Major Travas's team. Even his gloves and shoes were white. A white cloth was wrapped around his head like a turban, and another covered his face.

There were radios covered in white cloth strapped to the utility belt around his waist. One on either side of him. One was to listen in on Claire and Fiona's conversation, and the other to speak with Fiona.

Treize was holding a white pole. It was about 120 centimeters long, and he had hidden it behind his back inside his coat until just earlier. Like a mummy out of a horror movie, it was wrapped in bandages.

The object wasn't simply a pole—it was made of metal, and could fire bullets. A rifle. At the end of it was a small hole, black as an abyss.

Treize was crouching. Only piles of snow were round him. And after several kneeling steps forward,

"Next."

Treize cautiously peered over the snow, exposing both his face and the rifle. Then, he took aim at the man 100 meters away, who was armed with a submachine gun and panicking over his friend's death.

The rifle roared.

The first gunshot had come out of nowhere. Her friend fell into the snow.

"What's going on here?"

Claire was completely lost.

That was when the second gunshot hit, and the other man fell on his side.

"Duck!" Elvar cried. Claire tossed aside her gun and fell on her stomach on the ground. Then she leapt into an alcove in the snow.

"Wh-what's happening?"

"That's not her! That's not the queen!"

No sooner had Elvar finished speaking than did a sharp noise zoom over the trenches.

"That's gunfire! He's shooting at us!" Elvar warned.

There was another noise overhead. It was the shockwave from the bullet, traveling faster than the speed of sound. The snow muffled the gunshots, but the sound of the bullets were unhindered.

"That's four..." Elvar muttered under his breath, lying on his stomach. In front of him was a rifle loaded with five rounds. Through wrinkled eyes he checked that the safety was off.

"I'll take care of this! Cover me, Elvar!" Claire cried. Elvar stopped her immediately.

"No! He's using a rifle, just like me! Do *not* stand! He will shoot you the moment you raise your head!"

"Damn it!"

Claire punched the ground, swearing. And several meters away,

"Wh-wh-wh-what's happening...?"

Lillia stammered to herself, looking up at the blue sky. Then she heard Elvar's voice.

"Leader!"

"Yes?" Claire replied. Elvar responded.

"One more shot, and he'll be out of ammo! Can you crawl over to Kirk?"

"To Kirk?" Claire repeated, but she quickly understood what he meant. "Yes! I can!"

Treize was one with the snow.

The long, thin barrel of his rifle was fixed just several centimeters above the surface of the snow. The tip of the bandages wrapped around it were almost touching the snow.

Covered all in white, Treize remained on one knee as he took aim from his hiding place in the snow.

His gun was pointed at where Claire had been standing until just a moment earlier.

In the world beyond his scope, blown up to four times the usual size, something stirred. A dark object rose from the snow.

Treize immediately adjusted his aim. He saw a head. The head of an older man.

Once he was certain that it was not Lillia, Treize brought the crosshairs over the man's head.

And he pulled the trigger.

The tiny bullet scattered snow around it as though unfurling layers of white wings, instantly crossing a distance of 150 meters and driving itself into the man's head.

The top of his head—the scalp, the skull, and the brain—was blown clean away. But that did not kill the man. He was already dead to begin with.

"That's five!" Elvar cried, raising his rifle.

"I'm sorry." Claire whispered an apology, letting go of Kirk's body.

Finally high enough that he had a shot at the enemy lying in the snow, Elvar looked through the scope to first find the navy coat. Thankfully it was not difficult to spot.

He then followed the tracks in the snow to locate the shooter. Again, he was not difficult to spot. About 3 meters to the side was a figure in white, on one knee in the snow.

The figure should have been desperately reloading his rifle.

But he was not.

He was taking aim.

The rifle was wrapped in white cloth and impossible to see distinctly, but the lens on the scope was clear in all its circular glory. In other words—

The enemy had the scope and the barrel pointed precisely in Elvar's direction.

The figure—Treize—pulled the trigger three times.

Three flashes of light emerged from the muzzle, and three cartridges were ejected through the side.

The first bullet blew away half the flesh and bone from Elvar's left shoulder. The second pierced his stomach, whipping through his innards to the point that they were beyond healing. The third knocked the rifle out of his hands.

"Grk...!"

Quietly, Elvar fell.

"Elvar!"

Claire crawled across the snow to reach the trench where Elvar lay. And there she saw—

"Ah..."

A bloodied man, trembling weakly on the ground. His lips were blue and his teeth chattered as he shook.

Elvar noticed Claire and feebly opened his mouth.

"L-Leader..."

"Hold on! I'll stop the bleeding!" Claire cried, sitting to his left and quickly pulling his coat open. She tried to tear open the buttons, but it wasn't as easy as she expected, forcing her to unbutton them from bottom to top, one by one.

"He's using... an automatic rifle... I'm sorry."

"Don't speak."

Claire opened up the coat and examined Elvar's stomach.

"Ah..."

And for a moment, she was stunned into silence. The body wrapped in combat gear was covered in blood.

She looked to Elvar's left shoulder, almost as if averting her gaze. The arm was nearly severed, and she could see white bone sticky with red.

"Leader... I know my body better than anyone. I'm finished."

"You will *not* die without my permission! You will *not*!"

"You must survive... use the hostage... negotiate with him..."

"I told you not to speak!"

With gloved hands, she pressed down on Elvar's bleeding shoulder.

"Gah!"

Elvar writhed in pain, but Claire did not stop.

"That's enough, Leader! ...Stop. You must... escape..."

"Shut up!"

Her gloves stained deep red, Claire continued to press Elvar's shoulder. Her tears wet the inside of her sunglasses.

"Damn it! Stop! Why won't it stop?!"

The bleeding continued. The moment Claire relaxed her arms, blood spilled again in time with Elvar's pulse.

Elvar moved his right hand. Weakly, he drew a handgun from his holster and disarmed the safety. Claire did not notice.

Slowly, Elvar brought the gun to his own head.

"AAAAAARGH!"

He raised his voice out of nowhere, pulling his right side upward. Claire fell back in surprise. Elvar's right hand was stretched out before he eyes. The handgun was pointed at the figure in white, who had appeared without warning.

Treize was faster to pull the trigger.

There was less than 10 meters between them. Elvar's gun shattered to pieces when the gunshot sounded, and the fingers and wrist holding up the gun were left splayed out in odd directions.

"Urgh!"

Claire turned at Elvar's scream and the gunshot, finally noticing the enemy behind her. He was wearing white combat gear, and armed with a white rifle. A white cloth was wrapped over his head and face. The only spot of black, the goggles on his face, looked for all the world like a cavern.

His feet crunching over the snow, Treize slowly approached his foes. The blood-covered man on the ground heaving for breath, and the woman sitting at his side. The barrel of the long rifle Treize had over his shoulder was already trained on the woman's forehead.

The automatic sniper rifle was one of the weapons brought in by Major Travas's team. It was a new model that could fire up to ten consecutive shots. The barrel was long and narrow, and the stock was designed to be as thin as possible to reduce the weight. A scope with crosshairs was attached to the rifle.

"Damn you..."

Treize came to a stop just 2 meters from Claire and Elvar. Underfoot was firm, trodden snow. With the rifle still aimed at Claire, Treize shifted it from his shoulder to his side. There was even less distance now between the gun and the hostage-takers. A gloved index finger touched the trigger.

In a low voice, Treize asked,

"Where is the hostage?"

"..."

Claire silently glowered.

"Where is she?!" Treize cried. At that very moment,

"Here!" Lillia cried from the snow.

Treize did not even turn. He kept his rifle trained on Claire as he called back.

"Lillia! Are you okay?"

"Yeah!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No! Oh, what about you?"

"I'm fine! Just stay there for a second!"

"Why? What's going on here?"

Treize did not answer.

As Treize stared at Claire through his goggles, the rifle still pointed at her head, Lillia stood. She dusted the snow off her coat and squinted, scanning the snowy lake.

Then, she spotted Treize—dressed in white—about 10 meters ahead. Lillia strode over the rough snow towards him.

"What? Aren't you going to shoot?" Claire taunted. At the same time, her right hand—hidden from Treize's view—slowly moved to her waist. There was a hole in her coat pocket, letting her reach her clothes inside. And the revolver she had holstered.

"L-Leader..." Elvar breathed. Claire had her eyes locked on Treize.

"What is it?"

"Leader... that's enough. You must surrender... we have lost..."

"..."

Claire looked at Elvar, lying before her. His face was deathly pale. She pulled his goggles off his face, and then his hat.

Elvar's wrinkled face and his eyes were reflected on her sunglasses.

"Surrender, Leader... and... survive..." Elvar said.

Lillia trudged over and stopped behind Treize, to his right.

"Ah—"

The moment she spotted the rifle in Treize's hands, and Elvar, lying on the ground, she gasped softly.

Elvar continued, his eyes on Claire.

"As long as you survive... you have another chance at revenge..."

"Is that... your plan?" Claire asked, calmly and coolly. Tears ran down her face.

"Yes, Miss... it is."

"I understand."

Gently, Claire nodded. Elvar smiled peacefully.

"Hm? You won't ask me, to call, you, 'Leader'? I was, honestly, hoping..."

His lips finally came to a stop, unable to finish.

Elvar died with his eyes wide open. Claire's hands drew over his face.

The sun emerged from the slopes in the east. It was the first dawn of the year 3306.

The blinding light enveloped the woman crying over the corpse.

"Oh..."

To Lillia, whose eyes were not covered, their silhouettes seemed to be melding into their surroundings.

"Lillia. Here."

With the rifle still in his right hand, Treize reached with his left and took out a pair of sunglasses wrapped in cloth. He tossed it to Lillia.

Lillia managed to catch it and quickly put it over her eyes.

The two were still there. The dead man and the woman holding his head.

Lillia took a deep breath, ready to say something to Claire.

"..."

But she could not bring herself to do it. She exhaled. Her breath rose in a sparkling puff in the morning light.

Treize pulled off the cloth wrapped around his face. And with his makeshift turban and his goggles still on, he spoke to the woman.

"You're... Claire Nichto?"

Claire did not respond. But Treize continued.

"I am Treize. Treize of Ikstova. And I love my country and its royal family. Queen Francesca has ordered me to subdue you all and rescue the hostage."

Lillia looked at Treize. Then she looked at Claire, who seemed to be frozen.

"Surrender without resistance, and I will hand you to the queen unharmed."

Claire slowly raised her head. And she looked to her left. For a second, Lillia and Treize could see the burning hatred in her eyes.

"I..." Claire said, "I will never stop..."

Lillia and Treize silently listened to Claire.

"I will never stop... So long as I breathe, so long as the royal family of Ikstova exists.... I will despise the bloodline and become its enemy. I curse the royal family. The line of demons. And the foolish country that serves the bloodline as its monarch."

"Is that all?" Treize asked coldly.

Lillia looked at Treize.

"I will never stop!"

And she looked at Claire.

"Stand back, Lillia." Treize said, slowly bringing his rifle up to his shoulder.

"Hey? What are you doing?" Asked Lillia. Treize decided to answer honestly.

"Nothing good will come of letting her live. It's best to get rid of her now, for Ikstova's sake."

"What— but— No! We're finished now! Just hand her over to the police!"

With a glance at the flustered Lillia,

"..."

Claire stared down into the muzzle.

"I am Treize of Ikstova. Claire Nichto—enemy of the kingdom—you will repent through death!"

Treize put pressure on his trigger finger.

There was a gunshot.

The bullet drove itself deep into the snow.

"Huh?"

Treize was stunned.

The moment he pulled the trigger, the rifle was pushed to the left. The bullet meant for Claire hit a mound of snow and sent it sprinkling everywhere.

The cause of the push was clear. Lillia had rushed in and shoulder-tackled the rifle, pushing his aim aside.

"Huh?"

For a moment, Treize lost his balance. Claire saw her chance and quickly drew her revolver.

"Die!"

In one smooth motion, she took aim at Treize—

"Lillia Kick!"

A hard sole struck Claire in the head. Lillia had kicked her on the left temple.

"Ugh!"

Claire's sunglasses went flying. She collapsed to her right, losing consciousness over Elvar's body. The revolver fell out of her hands and lodged itself halfway in the snow.

"What are you—"

Lillia cut Treize off.

"Enough messing around, *both of you!*" She chastised them.

* * *

It had been about ten minutes since Fiona gave the command to begin the mission, which Treize had planned and carried out with gear from Major Travas.

Fiona was standing still outside the villa doors, holding the radio.

"I told you. Don't worry." Benedict said, but Fiona did not respond. Benedict turned to Major Travas beside them and shrugged.

Treize's voice came over the radio.

<This is Treize. HQ, please respond. Do you copy?>

Fiona closed her eyes and looked up with a sigh. Then she replied,

<Yes... Are both of you safe?>

<Yes. The plan was a success. I've taken Claire Nichto into custody.>

Upon hearing the report, Benedict held out a fist at Major Travas. Major Travas held out his own fist and bumped it against Benedict's.

<Good work... I'm proud of you. We'll send for you, so could you wait there a little longer?>

<Of course. But—>

Treize paused, then.

<But what? What is it?> Asked Fiona. Several seconds passed before Treize answered.

<Lillia's mad. She's very mad.>

Chapter 10: The Worthless Treasure

The first day of the year 3306 of the World Calendar. Morning.

The sun rose into the blue sky, casting light on the city of Kunst.

Piles of snow slid in satisfying clumps from the steep roofs in the city, revealing the blue paint underneath.

After the night of festivities, partygoers exchanged new year's greetings and parted ways, returning to their homes or hotels.

It was in that midst that several groups of people entered the Kunst police department building. Not through the main doors, crowded with civilians reporting lost belongings, but through the back door, which criminals were brought through. Members of the royal guard, wearing suits and sunglasses, were on alert as they kept watch at the doors.

In the basement of the building, in a section off-limits to most officers, was a waiting room. The group of people entered the large room, which was furnished with sofas. At the same time, the suit-clad men on standby stood up straight.

Stepping inside was the queen, her husband, and several members of their security detail.

The only people in the room who did not stand were Lillia and Treize.

Lillia was sitting on the sofa, holding a mug of tea. And she was glaring at Treize, who sat across from her with a very apologetic look.

"There was no other choice, Lillia. I explained why they attacked the villa, and if that treasure they're looking for really exists..." Treize tried to explain, still wearing his white combat gear.

"But how could you try to kill someone who wasn't even resisting?! And what was all that about revenge? I don't get any of this! You're *both* idiots, for all I care!"

"No, well..."

"I don't know what that treasure is. But..."

"But?"

"If I'm the first one to find it, I am going to destroy it!" Lillia declared.

"Yes. I decided on the way here that that might be the best option." Said a female voice.

"Yeah! Glad you agree!" Lillia cheered, turning around.

There stood a woman in a white blouse with a slightly swollen cheek.

"Er... who are you?"

Not realizing that the men behind the woman were all tense and looking particularly reverent, Lillia rudely remained seated.

Fiona smiled gently and let Treize answer.

"Er... well..."

He trailed off. Lillia shot him a fierce glare.

"This is..."

'This is my mother', Treize could have said to close off his avenues of escape—in fact, it was the perfect opportunity. But...

"This is?"

Cowed by Lillia's rage, Treize answered,

"This is Queen Francesca!"

At that moment, the new year finally arrived in Sfrestus.

"It's 3306! Happy new year, Elder Sister!"

"Happy new year, Meriel! And happy new year, 'Treize the Numbskull'!"

Fireworks whistled in the distance.

"What?" Lillia gaped. Treize jumped to his feet as though he'd just realized the queen's presence.

"Er... this is! This is Queen Francesca!"

"What?"

Lillia looked up at Treize. Then she looked at Fiona.

"I-is that true?"

It was a foolish question. Lillia was the only person in the room still seated.

Fiona smiled and nodded. And she introduced herself.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Lillianne Schultz. I am Francesca of Ikstova."

"So, the queen?"

"Yes."

"Er..."

"Yes?"

Lillia leapt to her feet, standing stiff. Then she did a 90-degree bow.

"I-I-I-I-I'm sorry I'm very very sorry!"

"Please, don't worry about it."

"I-I-I'm Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz and I am a simple commoner and I don't really know what to tell you about this and what I'm trying to say is—"

"Please, raise your head." Fiona said kindly, and Lillia finally did so. But she kept her gaze low, unable to look the queen in the eye.

At that moment,

"Oh! Here you are!"

They heard a familiar, laid-back voice.

"Hey there, Lillia! Treize! I was going to go back to the cottage when I heard from the police. You had a rough night, didn't you?"

Allison entered—coat in hand—and strode across the room, past Treize, and to Lillia's side.

"..."

Lillia stared incredulously at her mother.



"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"D-don't you have any idea who this is...?" Lillia gasped, trembling. Allison ignored her daughter's fretting and turned to the queen. She waved lightly.

"Happy new year!"

"Thank you. Happy new year." Fiona replied with a smile.

"MOM!"

Lillia exploded.

When Lillia pressed her head down multiple times in a forced apology, explaining her mother's rudeness in tears, Allison finally understood.

"I'm very sorry ma'am please forgive my mother's insolence we're so very sorry!"

Allison glanced at her daughter. Then she glanced at Treize.

'I'm sorry I am an idiot I'm sorry I haven't told her yet' Treize mouthed silently.

For a time, the children apologized to one another's parents.

After a while, Lillia finally calmed down, and they were able to sit down and have a conversation.

Lillia and Allison sat side-by-side, as did Fiona and Benedict. Treize sat on a chair on the side.

Benedict introduced himself to Lillia. Lillia jumped to her feet again and greeted him, then forced her mother to her feet and made her greet Benedict as well.

And once Lillia was calm again,

"We heard about what happened from Treize." Benedict said in Roxchean. "I am ashamed to say that this incident was due to our poor security. But thanks to the courageous actions of Treize and Lillianne, we were able to minimize our losses and put an end to the incident."

Fiona continued.

"I would like to thank the two of you on behalf of Ikstova's royal family and its people. Thank you so much."

"Please we didn't do anything at all." Lillia said quickly.

"Expect no less from my daughter." Allison grinned.

"Ack! MOM!" Lillia cried, about to explode again, so Benedict intervened.

"Anyway! Lillia, do you remember what you and Francesca agreed on earlier?"

"Hm? Pardon? Er... no, sir. I'm very sorry."

"You said you'd destroy the treasure if you found it." Treize said. Lillia, who misread Benedict's intention, apologized profusely again.

"I'm so sorry sir I did say that didn't I I'm very sorry how could I even think about destroying something so valuable?"

"Please, don't worry about it. I agreed with your idea. Raise your head."

"Ohh..."

Suddenly, Benedict raised an odd question.

"Are the two of you feeling sleepy?"

Treize shook his head, saying he was fine. Lillia also shook her head.

"I'm fine. I... actually woke up just last night."

"Excellent!" Benedict clapped his hands together. "Would you like to go see the treasure together?"

"Pardon?" Lillia gasped.

"What...? What did you just say?"

In a basement holding cell, Claire looked up from her seat with her hands cuffed behind her back. She was still in her combat uniform, its sleeves stained with blood, and was surrounded by police officers.

Standing before Claire was Benedict.

"We will now go to the valley."

"Ha! And how would you do that?" Claire spat incredulously.

"We will go by aeroplane. We will only survey the area from above, but if possible we will land and walk around. It is not impossible, is it?" Said Benedict.

Claire groaned and said nothing.

"Don't you want to see, too? The treasure your father never got to find?" Fiona said, stepping into the cell. And as her bodyguards watched worriedly, she stood before Claire. Claire smiled.

"Hello, Queen. Don't think I've given up. Now I need to avenge my men, as well."

"I've heard about that plan of yours. And you can go ahead and try. But—"

"But?"

"Don't you think it's a better idea to solidify your plans *after* you've seen the treasure?"

* * *

"Oho. So you were a pilot as well. One must never judge a book by its cover. We are very fortunate."

"Not at all. I should be thanking you for letting me take part in such a fun expedition. I hope my daughter will make some friends in the royal family through this opportunity."

Inside a moving van, Benedict in the driver's seat and Allison next to him were lying through their teeth.

"Er... my mother is a little strange, isn't she? I'm terribly sorry, ma'am."

"Not at all. She's very funny."

Lillia sat rigidly in the second row, next to Fiona.

And in the very back was Treize the Numbskull, sitting all alone. He had taken off his white combat gear and was in his usual clothes and a coat.

Guarded by a black security vehicle both ahead and behind, the van traveled down the road by the palace. Soon, the palace building came into view. The road sloped down toward the lake. And ahead, past the road cleared of snow, was a hangar. It was a large, semicircular building covered in snow. Several snowmobiles were crisscrossing the lake and preparing the runway.

The van drove onto the frozen lake and stopped in front of the hangar shutters. The occupants of the van put on coats and sunglasses, then disembarked onto the blinding snow.

Lillia scurried from Fiona's side to Allison's.

From the car following them emerged Claire, still in handcuffs. She was in a coat and sunglasses as well. The royal guards were keeping a watchful eye on her, never for a second letting her out of sight.

"This is the aeroplane you will be on."

Benedict waved his hand and ordered for the shutters to be opened. Loudly, the shutters slid to either side. The bright morning sun shone on the aeroplanes inside.

They were small green crafts. The sturdy wheels on the fixed landing gear were equipped with skis that seemed to cover the tires. At the nose were the engine and the propellers. The seats were arranged in a row, and a third seat was situated at the very back, surrounded by glass like a birdcage.

The wing atop the fuselage was very long and thin. The aeroplane was about 15 meters wide altogether. Although it was a biplane, the lower wing was attached to the back of the relatively short 8-meter fuselage.

"Huh. Funny design." Lillia remarked. Allison nodded.

"It really is an unusual design. People sometimes call this a tandem wing aircraft because one wing is at the front and the other is at the back. Though I've never actually seen one in person before. ...Excuse me, where did you get this aeroplane?" Allison asked Benedict, who was to her left.

"Mom! He's royalty!" Lillia hissed under her breath. Not offended in the least, Benedict replied in Bezelese.

"This is a modified craft prototyped at an aeroplane company in Sou Be-Il. They added an extra wing to a pre-existing design. The specs aren't too shabby, but supposedly the design was so unusual they were forced to halt production. I received two of these crafts from a certain someone. I think the gunner's seat at the back might be perfect for tourism and observation."

"Ah. I see." Allison replied, also in Bezelese. Benedict lowered his voice.

"I'll explain properly later, but... that certain someone was here until not long ago."

"Oh? Why?"

"That's the amazing thing about him. He sniffed out something while tracking weapon smuggling in the Capital District and made it here. He was a great help. Unfortunately, he had to leave a short while ago."

"He didn't say anything?"

"Ah. 'It's a shame I came all the way to Iks and still didn't get to catch a snow monster', he said."

"Oh my."

"I'll give you the details later."

Lillia tilted her head quizzically.

The royal guard brought Claire forward and had her stand before the group. Fiona went up to her.

"Unfortunately, I won't be joining you."

"Are you making fun of me?" Claire glowered. Fiona shook her head.

"No. So you'll have to find the treasure in my stead."

"..."

"Please, Claire."

"I have no intention of honoring your request." Claire said immediately, then added, "but... I will find what my father had longed to see."

* * *

The roar of engines resounded over the lake.

Two unusually-shaped crafts spun their propellers under the clear blue sky and the morning sun. Snow blew everywhere like a blizzard on the lake, about 5 meters from the hangar.

The two aeroplanes were labeled with numbers on the fins. In the pilot's seat of craft #1 was Benedict, behind whom sat the handcuffed Claire. And in the gunner's seat at the very back was a member of the royal guard—a man still in his twenties who had a muscular frame and a stern face.

Allison sat in the pilot's seat of craft #2. Behind her was Lillia, and in the back was Treize. All six bound to fly were decked out in heated clothes, one-piece flying suits, leather jackets, aviator hats, goggles, and parachutes.

Both aeroplanes were fueled. They were also stocked with rations, water, and tents in case of an emergency landing.

<This is Benedict. My aeroplane will be #1. #2, are you ready?> Benedict asked in Bezelese. His voice was audible to all six people, but Claire alone did not understand the language.

Allison fiddled with the controls in her seat as she pressed the call button and spoke into the microphone.

<This is #2, all clear to go. If there's anything else you need, ask me anytime during the flight.>

<I'm glad we have a competent pilot flying with us today.>

On Benedict's lap was a copy of the map Claire had brought. He skimmed it and switched to Roxchean.

<Now, everyone. I will confirm our schedule once more. It will be approximately one hour from takeoff to arrival at our destination airspace. This will not be a safe flight, as we must fly through narrow valleys. The weather is clear now but we will abort the mission should it worsen. Then let's be off.>

No sooner had he finished than #1 roared and began to taxi down the runway. It quickly gained lift and rose into the air. Slower than a car on a highway, it flew with ease toward the sky.

<Our turn.>

Allison said to Lillia and Treize over the internal radio and accelerated. The aeroplane scattered snow in its wake as it took off. Fiona watched silently as they departed.

In the hollow surrounded by snow-capped mountains, two tiny specks began to move.

The specks banked and passed over the palace, heading into the mountains. Then they slowly ascended as they turned into a valley on the southwestern part of royal property.

<Wow. It really is beautiful.> Lillia gasped as they flew over the still-wide valley. Allison and Treize heard her over the internal radio.

<It definitely is. But flying through the mountains is always dangerous. I should be careful.>

<I trust you, Mom.>

<Thank you, honey. And I trust our lead.> Allison said with a glance at Benedict's craft ahead. The two aeroplanes continued as though rushing at the massive slopes of the Central Mountain Range.

<You're being awfully quiet, Treize. Are you sure you're with us?>

<...Oh. Yes.>

Treize was slower to react than usual.

<I wonder what the treasure could be?> He wondered.

<Who knows?>

<Who knows?>

Mother and daughter thought for a moment before arriving at the same conclusion. Treize continued as though to himself.

<I'm sure the previous queen must have known. But she didn't reveal the treasure even when her own daughter was taken hostage. It must mean the treasure is something very important, right? Even more than the life of her own child... what could it be?>

<Who knows?>

<Who knows?>

<We might find out if we get there, and that'd make me happy. But I don't want to end up thinking, 'this wasn't worth it after all!'.> Treize said sadly. And no one spoke after that. Only the sound of the engine filled the plane.

<We are almost at the valley. Take care.> Benedict said over the radio.

* * *

The two aeroplanes maintained a reasonable distance as they flew through the vast valley.

The valley was hundreds of meters wide, and it continued at length at a gentle slope and curve. Trees dotted the valley with green on the layer of white. On either side were stone mountains capped with snow. Their peaks were far above the aeroplanes. Wispy clouds floated in the sky overhead.

They were about an hour into the flight. Because they were slow, they had only covered a little more than 100 kilometers. There were still 30 kilometers to go.

<Hm. This is strange.> Said Benedict.

<It certainly is.>

<Yes.>

Allison and Treize agreed.

Confused, Lillia asked for an explanation. Allison spoke for herself, Benedict, and Treize.

<We've been flying for quite a while now, haven't we?>

<Uh-huh. And?>

<Now, we should be at the heart of the Central Mountain Range. But this valley isn't getting any higher. I'd guess we're at about 3500 meters above sea level. The valley floor is at about 3200. The Central Mountain Range should be much higher than that. There shouldn't be any flat valleys so far in.>

Lillia finally understood.

<This is uncharted territory, so nothing would surprise me here... but this is strange indeed.> Benedict said. Afterwards, he and Allison checked their fuel supply and double-checked the amount of flying time they had left.

Leaving out the fuel they needed to return, they could still fly for over an hour.

The two aeroplanes continued without incident. They maintained about the same altitude and distance from the valley walls. But the mountains on either side grew higher and higher. The valley was already sandwiched between a pair of sheer cliffs hundreds of meters high.

<This is incredible. What was it called again? That big cliff?>

Slankalans, Benedict answered Allison.

<Yes. That. I think this place just might be a match for it.>

<You're right... you could even walk here if you wanted to.> Benedict agreed.

At the same time, the valley suddenly veered sharply to the left. It was the first sharp turn in the valley—so sharp that they could not see behind the corner until they banked. Benedict cautioned Allison.

<As you can see, the valley curves to the left.>

<Yes. Confirmed.>

<We will stick as far to the right as possible before banking toward the middle of the valley. If by chance there happens to be a wall behind the corner, quickly bank right and turn back.>

<Yes. This craft could make a turn like that.>

<According to the map, we are not far from the treasure... but this is only a vague mark, so we cannot know the specifics. We are now making the turn.>

The two planes had been flying side-by-side, but they switched to a linear formation. Benedict took the lead as he slowly stuck close to the right side of the valley. A wall of stone and snow flowed past, only 30 meters from the tip of the wing.

The craft banked to the left again. The world behind the corner slowly came into view. The valley continued on into the distance. Benedict continued to bank.

<The valley seems to continue. We will keep flying for now.>

<Understood.>

<We can continue until—hm?>

Benedict interrupted himself in shock.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

Curiously, Allison and Lillia looked forward. The valley continued ahead, past Benedict's craft. Mother and daughter spotted it at the same time.

"Oh!"

"What?"

Behind the corner, the valley continued. But it was now brown.

The valley, covered in snow just behind them, was suddenly covered with soil like on the plains of Roxche, stretching on for kilometers.

<My word... do you see that?> Benedict gasped. Claire also seemed surprised.

<I see it... It's incredible.>

<How?>

Neither Allison nor Lillia could hide their shock, either.

"C'mon... what are you looking at?" Treize mumbled. He knew that something was going on, but all he could see from his birdcage was the world behind the aeroplane.

The others oohed and ahed, raising Treize's expectations. And after what seemed to be a long wait, it finally came into his view.

"Whoa! What is this? Wh-what in the world?" He finally gasped, the last one in the party to see.

<This is Treize. What's going on here?>

Benedict replied over the radio.

<I am not certain why, but the snow is gone... which is impossible for this area in winter.>

The two aeroplanes slowed and descended further as they flew over the earth-covered valley. Their altitude was at under 50 meters, and they were traveling at about the same speed as an express train. The world passed lazily by them.

"I don't believe it..." Treize whispered.

Below the window he could see the soil on the ground. The cliffs on either side of the valley were covered in snow, but there wasn't a spot of white to be seen on the ground. He spotted small streams at points along the way.

From his open vantage point, Treize looked around and enjoyed the view. But—

"Huh?"

When he spotted the incongruity, he was struck dumb. He stopped blinking.

The two aeroplanes covered about 3 kilometers as they flew close to the ground. Then,

<This is the end. There is more snow overhead. We will accelerate and climb.> Said Benedict.

The brown of the valley came to an end, giving way to snow again. Benedict pushed the throttle with his left hand and pulled the control stick with his right. The aeroplane buzzed as it sped up and climbed. Allison followed behind him.

<That was fun. It looks like we'll have something to report once we return.>

<Yes.>

Allison and Benedict chatted in Bezelese. Suddenly—

<Hey! Did you see that?! Over there!> Treize cried in Roxchean.

"Hm?"

"What?"

"Huh?"

Benedict, Allison, and Lillia furrowed their brows.

<Did no one else see that? Anyone?> Treize asked anxiously. Only Claire, sitting beside Benedict, reached for her call button.

<Boy. Did you see, too?>

<Yes. Then you noticed?>

<I don't believe it, but...>

<So I'm not going crazy, right?>

<Not to worry. I thought I was losing my mind, too.>

<What are you two talking about?> Benedict asked in Roxchean.

<I don't believe it, but just now... on the side of the valley...> Treize trailed off. Lillia spoke.

<What? Come out and say it already.>

Treize finally answered.

<A person... with his arms in the air.>

Exclamations of disbelief filled the aeroplanes.

<No... that is not possible. This is the middle of the Central Mountain Range. You must have seen a bear.> Benedict said, incredulous.

<No! I know what I saw. He was dressed in black—it was a person, I just know it!>

<I saw him as well. But who am I to say anything? Hmph.>

The two witnesses did not back down.

<Maybe we should check it out.> Allison said. <The ground looks firm, so these crafts could stick the landing. I'll try first and contact you if it works out. If not, get us help.>

Benedict thought for a moment.

<I understand. Even if we continued to fly, the valley would soon rise and we will not be able to maintain this altitude. It is indeed strange that there was no snow there, so we will investigate it.>

Then he signaled for a turn. The two aeroplanes slowly banked in the valley, changing directions.

Soon, they were back to facing the brown valley. Benedict's craft climbed, and Allison's slowed and descended to prepare for landing. Benedict, flying ahead, checked the state of the ground and informed Allison that it seemed to be all right to land on.

Allison warned Lillia and Treize of the imminent landing and touched down near the center of the valley. Very slowly, the aeroplane made contact with the ground. The sturdy tires dug into the soil. The aeroplane shook along for dozens of kilometers before finally coming to a stop.

Then, Allison started the engine again. The aeroplane taxied forward. Over the radio Allison informed Benedict that landing was possible.

The engine stopped, and a sudden silence fell over the aeroplane.

"Can we get off, Mom?"

"Sure. But make sure to stick with Treize."

"Why?"

"It could be dangerous. We have no idea what's out there."

"Tch."

Pouting, Lillia pushed the windshield open and stood. She felt the valley air on her skin.

"Hm. It's not that cold."

"Maybe there's no wind because it's a valley?"

Allison stepped out of the pilot's seat. Treize also left the birdcage. Soon, there was a deafening roar as Benedict's craft landed. It taxied across the ground before stopping about 30 meters behind Allison's craft.

Allison and Lillia, Treize, Benedict, Claire, and the young royal guard.

The six people were gathered together. They took off their parachutes and put them down in a pile. They took off Claire's handcuffs, but tied a cord around her waist and had the guard hold it.

"This place is marvelous. There is no snow here at all." Benedict said, scanning their surroundings. There was no wind or sound in the valley. Though it was hundreds of meters wide, the cliffs on either side—also hundreds of meters tall—gave the place a claustrophobic air.

They saw no moving objects. Everyone took off their goggles and sunglasses, as there was no glare here.

"If this is center of that patch of brown, we should head a little further." Said Treize.

"I see. Then we will head that way." Said Benedict as he led the way.

Dirt got on everyone's shoes, but it was not difficult to walk. Benedict was at the head of the party, armed with a handgun in case of a bear attack. Following him was Allison, then Lillia and Treize. Bringing up the rear was Claire and the royal guard.

The party walked in single file along the valley. They walked down a slope. The ground was covered almost entirely in dirt. There were no large rocks or boulders, which were characteristic markers of valleys formed by glaciers.

"It almost looks like a farmer's field. Perhaps the person you saw made it." Said Benedict.

At that point, he suddenly froze. Allison, who was looking to the side, quickly stopped before she walked into his back.

"Ah—"

Lillia bumped into her mother. Treize stopped behind them, and Claire and the royal guard came to a stop at a slight distance.

"What's going on?" Allison asked, looking up at Benedict. She walked to his right side and followed his gaze.

"..."

Her blue eyes turned to dinner plates as she also froze.

"What?" Lillia asked, peering out from behind her. "AAHHH!"

And with a shout, she took cover behind her mother again.

Treize and Claire slowly peered out from behind Benedict. And—

"See? I told you."

"I knew it..."

They nodded simultaneously. The guard behind Claire stared, slack-jawed.

People were walking toward the party from the base of the valley.

There were about a dozen of them walking side-by-side. They were all dressed in black. At first sighting they were about 300 meters away, but they soon closed that distance.

All the people were well-built men, and what seemed to be black clothing from a distance turned out to be bear pelts. The men were heavily bearded and had long hair, making it seem like they were covered in black. They were not carrying anything.

"Impossible... how could there be people here...?" Benedict mumbled in Bezelese, finally breaking his silence.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's going on here? How? Why?"

"I'm not sure..."

Lillia and Allison stared, clinging tightly to each other.

Treize silently walked up to Benedict. Benedict whispered to his son.

"Sorry for doubting you earlier, Treize. But who do you think these people are? What's going on here?"

"How should I know?"

"You think we can communicate with 'em?"

"Dunno..."

Claire walked up to the rest of the party and looked at the men, mumbling under her breath.

"Would that be the treasure?"

Treize and Benedict replied almost in unison.

"Who knows?"

"Who knows?"

The men were getting closer and closer.

Then, about 20 meters from the group, they stopped. They were a line of black fur clothes and bearded faces. The men were all at least middle-aged, ranging from their forties to their sixties. Some were grimacing.

Dozens of tense seconds passed by the time the oldest of the men finally stepped forward. He stopped about 5 meters from the party.

"-----."

And with a deep breath, he said something in a flat but pleasant tone. Everyone in the party could hear him. But—

"Wh-what's he saying?"

"I'm not sure. Did you understand, Lillia?"

"As if."

Benedict, Allison, and Lillia did not get a word. The man was speaking neither Bezelese nor Roxchean.

But Treize raised his voice.

"-----! -----, -----."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

Everyone but Claire turned to Treize, dumbfounded. The man responded to Treize.

"-----, -----, -----, ----."

Treize then replied.

Lillia watched everything in horror.

"No way... Treize is speaking moontongue..."

The conversation continued. Treize easily went up to the older man. With just a few meters between them, they spoke in what Lillia called moontongue. The man was stoic, and Treize excited.

"What do you think they're saying?"

"I'm not sure." Benedict replied to Lillia's question. Claire sighed.

"So you don't know, then. I suppose it's not surprising."

"Hm? Miss Nichto, you mean to say that you understand that language?" Benedict asked, surprised. Allison and Lillia simultaneously looked at Claire.

"Not completely, but I can understand most of it. They just exchanged greetings. The boy's apologizing for frightening them and explaining that we intend to do no harm."

"Incredible. If you do not mind me asking, what is that language?" Asked Benedict. Claire was incredulous.

"The language of this country."

"Pardon?"

"Our old mother tongue. Ikstovan."

Lillia remembered something.

"Oh! Treize said before that he knew Ikstovan!"

Treize was engaged in discussion with the older man. The man stood as still as a statue as he mechanically responded to Treize's questions. About three minutes later, Treize paused the conversation and returned to the party.

All eyes were on Treize as he explained in Roxchean.

"Hmm... Well... where do I start?"

"You don't have to explain. We'll just ask you questions. Who are those people?" Asked Lillia.

"Er... apparently they're the guardians of the valley. The old man told me over and over again, 'we are the guardians of the valley'."

"So why are they living in a place like this? How? Since when? Where exactly? And why?" Benedict asked all at once.

"H-hold on!" Treize said, "I haven't heard that much yet."

"What? Then what were you talking about all that time?" Lillia sighed.

"About aeroplanes, actually. He asked me how they could fly. And what those spinning things at the front were. The phrase 'dynamic lift' doesn't exist in Ikstovan, so I had a hard time trying to explain."

"Idiot! So you just spent all that time answering *their* questions? Isn't it supposed to be the other way around?!" Lillia snapped.

"Er... sorry. I'll go ask them again. I'll interpret as best I can, so don't worry." Treize apologized.

"..."

The men watched Lillia and Treize without a word.

The party went up to the old man who spoke with Treize and greeted him in Roxchean, lightly bowing their heads.

Benedict explained that all six people were part of their group, and that Claire had been arrested for her misdeeds.

"Hmph."

Treize ignored Claire and interpreted Benedict's words into Ikstovan. The older man responded.

"He says he understands. And he says he can't permit us to live here."

"Please tell him that we do not intend to." Benedict said, and asked Treize to ask the men who they were.

Treize did as Benedict asked. When the older man replied, Treize said something again. They had a brief exchange.

"What? What's going on?" Lillia whispered. Treize responded.

"No luck. He says it's a secret and he can't say a thing. And that they're not going to harm us, so we should leave. They're willing to see us off."

"What the heck..." Lillia said, crestfallen, but quickly recalled something. "Say, maybe these people are the treasure?"

"I'm not sure." Allison frowned. Benedict shook his head as well.

"These men? The treasure? Not a chance." Claire was the only one to outright deny the possibility. "No one would sacrifice so much to protect these scruffy hermits."

"You have a point..." Lillia nodded.

"But there's a good chance they know where the treasure is."

"Yeah..." Lillia nodded again. Claire grinned viciously.

"If only I had the means, I would torture them all to get information on the treasure."

"Please don't."

That was when Treize wrapped up the conversation.

"No good. He won't tell me. And he says we have to leave this valley immediately."

Claire snorted again. Benedict and Lillia did not try to hide their disappointment.

"Psst. Treize." Allison hissed, gesturing Treize over. He went up to her curiously, when she whispered something into his ear.

Treize was dumbfounded.

"What? ...I suppose..."

"Just give it a shot. Discreetly." Allison said with a wink. Treize went back to the older man.

"What did you tell him, Mom?" Asked Lillia.

"It's a secret. Let's just watch." Allison replied.

Walking up to the man, Treize reached inside his shirt. And he stood face-to-face with the man, leaning in and whispering something so Claire couldn't hear.

For the first time, the man's expression changed. His eyes widened in shock as he held out his hands toward Treize. Treize silently took them in his.

For a time, they stared at one another. Eventually Treize slipped his pendant back under his shirt.

The man brought Treize to the others. The ten or so men stood around him, holding out their hands. Treize took them all in turn.

Surrounded, Treize spoke quietly with the men. And at times during the conversation, shock spread over his face.

Left with nothing to do, Benedict and the others waited for the exchange to end.

About ten minutes later, Treize returned to the others.

"Now you can explain to us, right?" Asked Lillia. Treize nodded.

"It's incredible. Really."

"Get on with it."

"Okay, okay..."

Treize explained everything the men told him.

As their choice of language made clear, the men were of the traditional Ikstovan ways. They had walked to this valley from Ikstova to live here.

"They *live* in these conditions? How?" Asked Benedict.

"Well... apparently it's not impossible." Treize replied.

Because the valley was not too high above sea level, plants grew in the area from spring to summer. And wild sheep would come to the valley to feed on the plants. The men could butcher the sheep for meat or raise them for milk, making survival possible.

"But what about winter? Isn't it going to get colder from now on?" Asked Lillia.

Treize explained that the lack of snow underfoot explained everything. There was supposedly a great deal of heat in the earth around the valley. Not only that, the men lived in the caverns in the cliffs. Deep inside were groundwater streams that provided them with hot water all year round.

"Hot springs... I see! They beat the cold with the hot water, and subsist on the food they stored during the year." Allison nodded. "But are there no women around here? I don't know how long they've been living this way, but they can't have any children like this. Why are these people living *here*, anyway?"

"Yeah. It's just one question after another." Lillia agreed.

"I heard the reason as well," said Treize, "I can hardly believe it, but it doesn't seem like they're lying."

"Tell us."

"Right. Apparently they've been living this way for four hundred years."

"Four hundred years?" Lillia squawked. Allison chimed in.

"So when the current royal dynasty began."

"Yes. Apparently that was when this strange valley was discovered. Afterwards, the royal family recruited people to protect the valley at all costs. ...And about the progeny issue..."

"Mhm?"

"They said that they live here for years before walking all the way back to Ikstova in secret. They would only go in the winter to avoid being witnessed. They would have children in Ikstova, and if they had a son, the son would take on the role from his father.. They say that several families have been carrying on the tradition."

"I see. That makes sense." Said Benedict.

"Oh! I just realized something!" Allison clapped her hands together. "Those snow monster sightings in Ikstova must have been—"

"—Yes. People must have glimpsed these men and assumed they were monsters."

"Aww," Allison sighed, "I feel bad for people who were excited to find out about a mysterious new species in the mountains." She said, not revealing which person she had in mind.

"And these men received support behind the scenes from—"

"The royal family." Claire finished Treize's sentence.

Lillia turned in shock. Treize nodded. Claire continued.

"That explains everything. When the royal family found the treasure here, they gathered these men to live here and protect it. Then the royal family designated the lakeshore that leads into this valley their own personal property, making it off-limits and burying everything in secrecy. They didn't even inform the royal guard. And for generations, they

passed on the secret to their one offspring. The map my father found must have been left in the home of one of these 'guardians'."

"I see. Hmm." Benedict nodded again and again. Claire gestured at the men.

"Look at them. They're all old. When the previous queen died, they must have been left without a sponsor and lost whatever they had established in Ikstova. So they must have remained here for nearly thirty years. Or perhaps they simply couldn't petition 'Francesca', even if they returned. Am I wrong?"

Treize looked Claire in the eye.

"No. You're correct."

Benedict praised Claire.

"Shut up. It doesn't matter anymore." Claire turned down his compliments. Then she asked very loudly, "so what did they say? What is the treasure in this valley? The treasure that my father sought, and spilled the blood of countless people?"

Treize shook his head.

"Well... I..."

"What?"

"When I asked about the treasure, they told me that they had no idea what I was talking about."

"What? Why would they go so far to protect the valley, then?! Are these cliffs that important? Or perhaps the hot springs that run even in the dead of winter?!" Claire demanded, approaching Treize. The royal guard pulled on her cord. Treize snapped back.

"Don't you think I asked?! But they wouldn't say anything else! They're just protecting the valley!"

"Maybe they've forgotten about the treasure over all the generations?" Lillia wondered.

"I thought it might be a little offensive, but I asked anyway. I asked if there was any sort of treasure ever hidden in the valley. They said, 'no, we simply lived here to protect the valley'."

"Then what is the treasure?"

No one could answer Lillia's question.

Everyone was silent. Dozens of seconds passed more slowly than usual.

"What shall we do?" Benedict broke the silence, "we could inform these people about the new queen and have them return to Ikstova for the time being... and perhaps we should postpone the treasure hunt?"

"Maybe. I think it's about time we went back. But this is a great discovery in and of itself." Allison said.

Lillia and Treize had no particular objections, so they said nothing.

Claire alone seemed unsatisfied.

"Don't joke around! The treasure exists! I will ask them myself!"

"They will not tell you simply because you speak their language." Said Benedict.

Claire, unwilling to acknowledge that, tried to walk over to the men as they stared from a distance. But the royal guard pulled on her cord and left her struggling in place.

"Damn it!"

"Yeah... maybe we should just go back for now." Treize mumbled, "this valley is interesting, but we can save the exploring for later..."

"Yeah. I think I might fall asleep soon." Lillia agreed.

Treize yawned loudly. "Yeah. I'm really getting tired. The men said we can fly all the way to Sou Be-II through here, but I guess we can test that out later."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Allison and Benedict reacted at once. Their expressions changed dramatically.

"Wait! What did you just say?"

"Treize, say that again?"

Flabbergasted, they demanded the exact same answer from Treize at once.

"Huh?" Treize frowned. "I'm getting tired?"

"No! The next part!" Allison cried. Lillia had rarely seen her mother so agitated.

"You can get to Sou Be-II through here, you said?" Said Benedict, "that's what you said, right?"

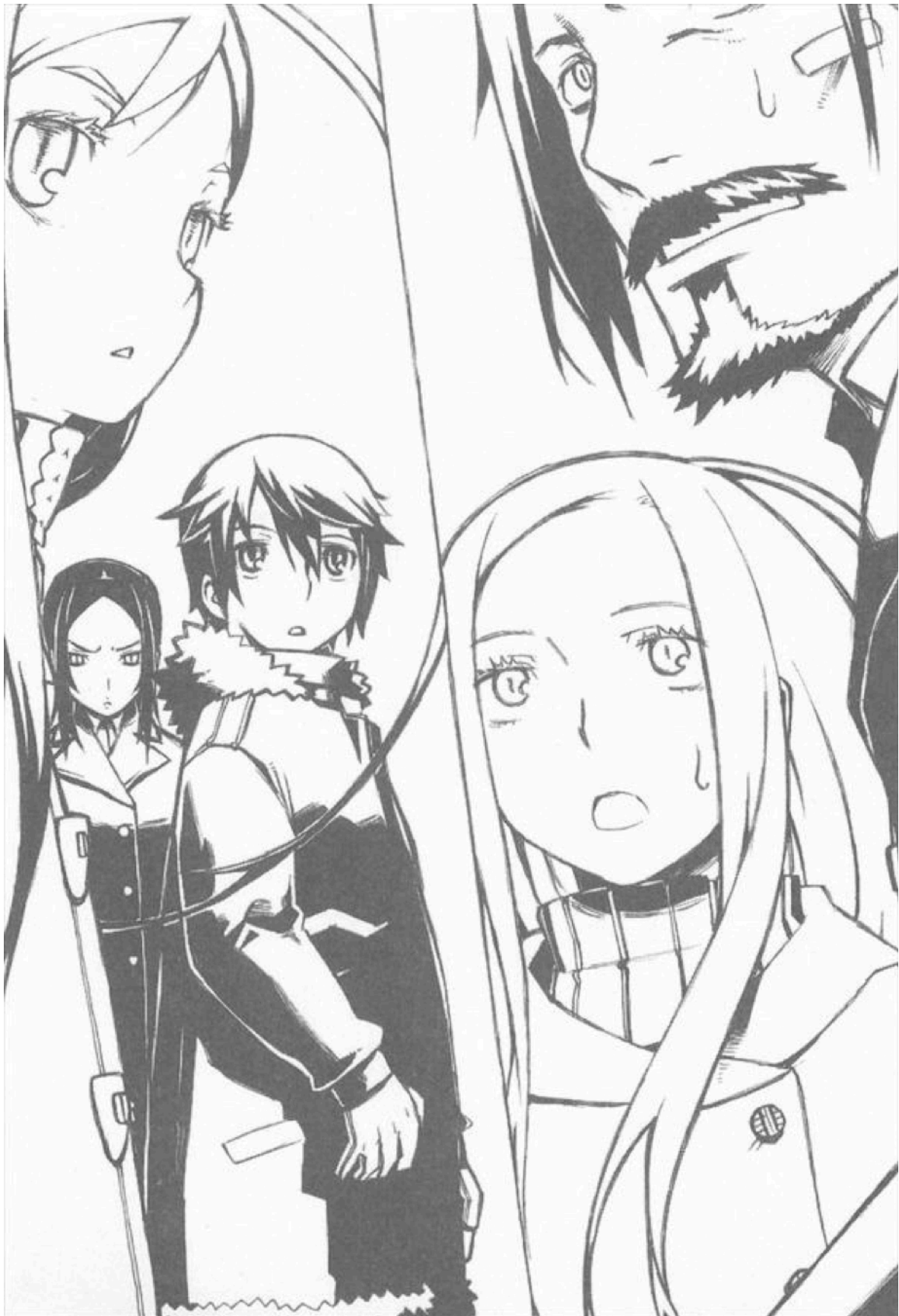
"Right?"

Treize nodded.

"Yeah. Apparently they sometimes pack a lot of food and walk all the way to Sou Be-II. To Iltoa. But you know how people in Iltoa don't live in the mountains like we do? These men can go over and come back unseen as long as they don't go all the way to the foot of the mountains." He explained nonchalantly. Benedict nearly fainted.

"My word..."

Allison's eyes were wide with shock.



"No way... I don't believe it..."

Treize, Lillia, Claire, and the young royal guard stared in confusion.

Finally, Treize broke the silence.

"Could you tell us what you're so surprised—"

"It's the treasure!" Benedict cried.

"Huh?" Lillia raised an eyebrow. Claire frowned.

"This really is a treasure!"

"Yes! This valley was the treasure!"

Lillia tugged on her excited mother's sleeve.

"I don't get what you're saying, Mom. Could you please explain?"

"Oh, right... You wouldn't know, since you all grew up after the war..."

"Nope." Lillia shook her head.

"Let me explain. I will explain." Benedict stammered, finally regaining some semblance of calm. "From the valley's discovery four hundred years ago to approximately twenty years ago, East and West—Roxche and Sou Be-Il—were at war. You must remember that. Because of the Lutoni River, it was not easy for one side to attack the other. So no real progress was ever made in the war. And—"

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

Treize and Claire understood simultaneously. As did the royal guard.

Benedict turned to Lillia, who was still lost, and continued to explain.

"And the other obstacle between the sides is the Central Mountain Range here. The peaks are over 10,000 meters high, and you can never cross it on foot."

"But you can." Lillia said absently. "Treize said these people can cross over on foot through the valley, right?"

"Precisely! That is why this valley is a treasure! You can walk to Sou Be-Il through this valley. And in a way that the other side will never notice. Do you understand what this means?"

Still dumbfounded, Treize continued where Benedict left off.

"If Roxchean forces were assembled in Ikstova... they could lead the forces through the valley and take the Iltoa region completely by surprise. And even a baby could tell you that Roxche would have the upper hand then..."

"Ah! I see now!" Lillia cried, finally understanding. "That's why this is a treasure!"

Treize nodded.

"Yeah! That's why the royal family was so desperate to hide this valley—to prevent it from being used in a war. Four hundred years ago, before Roxche was founded, knights were fighting over the Lutoni with spears and bows and swords. And if the valley were to be discovered then—or even later, when the Confederation was founded—the hostilities would have worsened dramatically. The royal family *had* to keep this route a secret!"

"So back then, the valley was important enough to completely change the course of history." Lillia said, and tilted her head. "Hm? Wait a sec. What about now?"

"Yeah." Treize said.

Next to him stood Claire, white as a sheet, already aware of the answer. Treize continued.

"During the war, this valley was definitely a valuable treasure. It was worth the lives of many people. I understand completely why the royal family decided to hide it at all costs."

"Yeah. But what about now?" Lillia asked again.

"Er... well..." Treize trailed off.

"It has practically no value anymore." Allison said firmly.

Benedict nodded. Allison continued.

"We're not going to have an all-out war between East and West anymore. There are bridges over the Lutoni now, and we can cross over freely. And in five or so years, aeroplanes are going to have pressurization devices that let them just fly clear over the Central Mountain Range. This valley's going to end up like Slankalans. An interesting but peaceful and quiet sight that draws in tourists and geologists from around the world."

"..."

Silently, Lillia's gaze slowly went from Allison's blue eyes to the black-haired woman standing a few meters off to the side.

"..."

Claire was sobbing quietly. Tears ran down her pale cheeks.

"No... no... this can't be..." She gasped between sobs, "this is the treasure Father sought all those years? This... the treasure he wanted to find for Roxche and Ikstova...? The treasure he gave his life to pass on to me...? So by the time he lost his life, it was already worthless...?"

Treize, Benedict, Allison, and the royal guard said nothing as they watched the weeping Claire.

"..."

Lillia as well.

"Elvar... Mores... Jake... Mike... Wayne... Palmer... Kirk... Burress... they all died... for *this*?"

Feebly, she fell to her knees and hung her head.

"Ah..."

Claire's tears fell to the ground and soaked the earth.

As everyone stood silently, Lillia walked up to her.

Standing beside the sobbing Claire, she placed a hand on her shoulder and said,

"Weep not, Milady. Life and suffering are one and the same; you must overcome this pain'."

* * *

The two aeroplanes took off in the narrow valley.

With a deafening roar, the strangely-designed crafts flew side-by-side overhead. They moved their flaps as they descended the valley, toward Iks.

The men watched until the aeroplanes were out of sight.

"A prince, eh? Such honest and clear eyes. And gentle, too."

The oldest of the men who spoke to Treize remarked in perfect Roxchean. The others nodded.

From under the fur, the man drew a knife he had hidden on his back. It was a terrifying weapon with a wide, 30-centimeter-long blade. He glanced down at the knife.

"It's a good thing he told us quickly. Almost ended up killing a member of the royal family."

Epilogue

The 14th day of the first month of the year 3306 of the World Calendar.

The Schultz family kitchen.

"So you really went through all that, Lillia? ...That's incredible."

Strauski Megmica,

"It was a real once-in-a-lifetime experience..."

And Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz were talking over the table, several newspapers open before them.

It was afternoon, and the weather was cloudy. Both had returned from the start-of-classes ceremony and come straight to Lillia's house, and were still in their uniforms.

On the newspapers from the 3rd of the month were headlines like 'Treasure of Ikstova—Found', 'Never-Before-Seen East-West Corridor Discovered', accompanied by articles on the rediscovery of the valley.

The articles summarized the following. That the current queen of Iks made the decision to announce the discovery of the valley, which had been kept a secret in the royal family for centuries. It explained that the royal family had desperately kept the valley's existence hidden for fear of further conflict.

But the militaristic value of the valley had dropped when the queen's husband, Carr Benedict, discovered the mural and ended the war. And when Benedict learned of the treasure twenty years hence, he convinced the queen to announce it and made yet another mark in the pages of history.

The reactions from around the world, printed the next day, were generally positive. The royal family of Iltoa officially announced, 'The royal family of Iks saved the world from war by concealing the valley's existence'. The Presidential Office in Roxche released a statement saying, 'the royal family of Iks prevented bloodshed by hiding the valley from the public eye'.

Some in Roxche argued that the East could have been victorious had the valley been used, and that Iks had betrayed them, but they were very few in number and were soon buried in the voice of the majority.

"There must have been such a big commotion." Said Meg.

Lillia nodded. She quickly glanced through the paper, and found a tiny news article about a documentary crew from the Capital District shooting a film in Iks being killed in an avalanche.

"..."

For a time, Lillia stared silently at the article. She and Allison had been asked by the queen to abide by a gag order. Lillia could not tell Meg the truth, either.

She sighed. Meg gave her a quizzical look.

"What's wrong, Lillia?"

"Hm? N-nothing. I'm fine."

"Did something happen? Is something bothering you?"

"Huh? Er... it was just a lot of confusion." Lillia said vaguely.

"Mhm." Meg nodded, "say, about that boy who came here before—Treize—he's from Iks, right? Did you meet him there?"

"Huh? Y-yeah. I did."

"Lillia. Did you talk about anything important with him?" Meg asked, looking into Lillia's eyes.

"No. I didn't. Things were so hectic that I barely got to say hello."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Did you make plans to meet next time?"

"Actually, no. We just didn't have the time to plan that stuff."

"That's so sad."

"Huh? For who?"

"Both of you."

* * *

"Thank you for everything, Elder Sister. It was so kind of you to grant Meriel of Ikstova such a marvelous holiday."

"Not at all. Please send my greetings to Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict when you return."

"Of course!"

"To tell you the truth, Meriel, I hope dearly to soon become your real sister."

"My real sister?"

"Yes. I have already sent word to Treize, with permission from Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict."

"What... might you be saying, Elder Sister?"

"When Treize is twenty years old, I..."

"Yes?"

"...I want to bring him into the royal family of Bezel, as my husband."

"...Pardon?"

-The Longest Day in Ikstova: End-

Meriel and Treize

Quite a while ago, in Ikstova.

It was one winter, when Treize and Meriel were living in the valley.

They were in a warm room with a roaring fireplace. Because they were twins, they were both four years old. But—

“You’re s’pposed to listen to your big sister, stupid!”

Little Meriel,

“Stupid Meriel! I’m your big brother!”

And little Treize were embroiled in a fierce debate.

They were both still little, but upon closer inspection Meriel was very slightly taller than Treize.

“But you’re *shorter* than me! That’s really suspicious!”

Looks like little Meriel has quite the vocabulary.

“What did you say?”

Looks like little Treize is upset he can’t keep up with Meriel’s vocabulary.

“I’m the big sister, so you’re s’pposed to do what I say!”

“Nuh-uh, I’m the li-big brother!”

“Oh! You said it! You were gonna say ‘little brother’!” Meriel cried triumphantly, allowing no room for argument. It was a ruthless attack.

Little Treize flushed a deep red, unable to respond. His lips trembling, he desperately racked his brains—

“Stupid Meriel!”

Little Meriel snorted and replied instantly.

“Right back at you!”

“Stupid stupid stupid!”

“Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid! Times a hundred!”

Cornered, little Treize groaned unintelligibly and lashed out with both hands at little Meriel.

Little Meriel evaded and struck back, seeing through his feeble attack. She punched him.

“Ow! Hey!”

"You started it!"

Punch. Smack. Thud. Ah, the argument's finally turned into a fight.

"Stupid Meriel!"

"Hey! Poopiehead!"

Punch. Smack. Thud. Brother and sister slapped and shouted and punched.

"Hm. Excellent right hook. Expected no less from my daughter." Said a heavily bearded man lounging on a chair at the side of the room.

Slap. Kick. Pow.

The battle to the death was reaching its climax.

CRASH!

That was when the queen herself rushed into the room.

"Both of you, enough! Do you *want* me to feed you to the snow monsters?!"

Little Treize froze, with a double-barrel nosebleed and tears welling in his eyes.

Little Meriel froze, with her right fist on Treize's forehead and her left prepared to throw a punch.

"Hm." Benedict nodded as he stood. "The winner is! Meriel!"

Afterwards, Benedict was badly scolded by the queen—"What were you doing just watching and letting them fight like that I don't believe this siblings shouldn't be hitting each other blah blah blah"—and little Meriel punched the air with a cheer.

"..."

Little Treize opened the door and ran as though escaping. He put on his jacket, his boots, and rushed out into the snow to the home of the old man, who was the best hunter in the village.

"Grandfather!"

"Ah, Your Highness. What's the matter, now? Why the tears?"

An elderly man stepped into the living room.

"Meriel's picking on me!"

"Dear me. What shall we do?"

"I'm gonna beat her!"

"Of course."

"Teach me to shoot! You're good at shooting, Grandfather!" Little Treize said between breaths. The old man nodded thoughtfully.

"Your Highness, a gun can make anyone stronger. Would you be happy to win that way?"

"But..."

"But?"

"But..."

Waaaaaaaah! Little Treize finally burst into tears. As the old man—and his wife, bringing in tea—watched, Treize sobbed out loud for several minutes.

Little Treize hiccuped as he gasped and cried and cried. Eventually, the old woman brought a not-so-clean piece of cloth and gently wiped Treize's face.

"I understand, Your Highness. I must follow your orders. I shall teach you to use a gun." Said the old man, lightly tapping his knee.

"Huh?"

When little Treize raised his head, the old man grabbed a rifle equipped with a scope from the wall and lifted it with ease. And he brought it over to Treize, who looked up at him with puffy eyes.

The old man checked to see that the rifle wasn't loaded, and said,

"Your Highness, hold out your left hand."

Little Treize nodded bravely and held out his left hand. The old man placed the rifle on it.

"Ah!"

Unable to bear the weight of the rifle, little Treize fell over and hit his shoulder on the floor.

The old man sighed.

"My, my. If you can't lift a gun with one hand, Your Highness, I'm afraid I can't teach you to use it."

Little Treize struggled to pull out his left hand from under the rifle and asked,

"Th-then what do I hafta do?"

The old man was quick to answer.

"You must train your body until you are able to lift a gun."

"Train? How?"

"Surely you can lift something like this, Your Highness?"

The old man handed him a small shovel for clearing snow.

Little Treize took the shovel in his hands. It was small, but for little Treize it was almost 70% of his height.

"Clear the snow from the front porch, Your Highness. You will become stronger and more muscular that way. And you will be able to lift a rifle with ease."

"Okay!"

Little Treize nodded enthusiastically.

"And you know what else, Your Highness? Everyone will be so pleased when you finish shoveling. It's like killing two birds with one stone."

"Okay! I will! I'll shovel! I'll train!"

So for some time after that,

"Training!"

Little Treize passionately cleared snow from houses in the valley.

The local women would comment,

"Oh my. The queen's son is growing up to be such a sweet boy."

They heaped praises on him.

That didn't mean, though, that Treize was immediately strong enough to beat Meriel.

"Stupid Treize!"

"..."

Afterwards, whenever he lost to Meriel, Treize would visit the old man and ask him to teach him marksmanship.

"You must become stronger if you wish to use a gun, Your Highness. The best exercise in the springtime would be to re-pot the plants and move the soil."

"You must have sharp eyes if you wish to learn marksmanship. And summer is the perfect season—count the cattle in the distance and train your vision."

"You must have stamina if you wish to maintain proper aim. I suggest going for a run in the mountains every day this autumn. From the forest with the orchard trees to... about here, I believe. And pick some fruits on the way back."

"You must have fine control if you wish to pull the trigger. Here, give me a shoulder massage."

Simple Treize was always excited for the next stage of training.

And he became the present-day Treize.

Of course, at some point he had completely forgotten about beating Meriel in a fight with a gun.

Present day. The year 3305.

"So in other words, it's all thanks to me that you've gotten so strong. Where is your gratitude, little brother?"

"You're the younger one, Meriel!"

"Is that any way to speak to the princess of this country? I should sue you for your insolence."

"That's fine by me! I've been itching to finally settle things between us!"

"Good. But I suppose mother might be sad to hear about us in court."

"Ah. ...Fine. Let's not."

"Then I win again."

"Why?!"

"Because you acknowledged defeat and backed down first."

"But—"

"It looks like you've still got a long way to go, little brother. Mwahahahaha."

"..."

"Grandfather, I need your help."

"What might be the matter, Your Highness? You're already a strong young man. I have nothing more to teach you."

"No, you do. Please tell me. How can I defeat Meriel in an argument?"

The prince hung his head. The old man narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice.

"Hmm... I've known the answer to that question for a very long time, Your Highness, but I suppose I have no other choice if it still escapes you. At my age, you never know how much time you have left."

"...Please! How can I defeat her?"

The old man replied without missing a beat,

"I'm afraid that is impossible."

-Meriel and Treize: End-

★小生意気なガキ〜またもふたたび〜★





じゃあな！

カルロ



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